

A man in historical costume, including a black beret, a brown coat, and a patterned vest, is holding a long wooden staff. He is standing in front of a stone building with arched windows. The title 'Hangman's Joke' is overlaid in a large, stylized font.

Hangman's Joke

Being the random musings
on Life, Art, History, Comics,
Literature, Philosophy and
Geek Culture of a Fat Bloke
who really should know better!

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INTRODUCTION

I have made my living – half of it, anyway – over the past quarter of a century, researching and scripting short drama and comedy presentations for performance at historical sites around Scotland. The other half, incidentally, is earned acting in such offerings. I can honestly say that every script I have ever produced has been sold and produced.

Whether they are any good or not...well, that's another matter entirely.

I'm a hack, a writer for hire. Aside from my Living History dramas, I write books on local history and folklore for The History Press, and others. That I'm still in work after a quarter of a century may well have more to do with pig-headed persistence than talent, but my work at least allows me to engage with audiences, and to try to share my enthusiasm for the subjects, themes and issues dealt with in my writing.

In 2010 I was approached by the owners of GeekPlanetOnline, and asked to produce a weekly column. These gents were aware of my work from various reviews and commentaries offered up to readers of SFX Magazine's online forums. GeekPlanet proclaiming itself 'The Fascination Nation', I was given free reign to produce pieces on any subject I chose – from Comic Books, Monster Movies and Geek Culture to Philosophy, Literature and issues of National Identity. My own personal bugbears, beliefs, heroes and villains were thus presented for the entertainment and elucidation of the website's ever-expanding readership. I can only hope that, as with my other writing I was able to convey a little of my enthusiasm (and occasional ire) on the subjects at hand to my audience.

After a year or so, with sixty-odd columns to my credit, health issues required that I withdraw from GeekPlanet as a regular contributor. Since that time I have been asked many times to compile an anthology of these essays. So, finally, with very little revision, I now present just such a collection.

The original columns are still available on GeekPlanetOnline.Com . Its title, Hangman's Joke, refers not to the rock band featured in the mythology of The Crow comic book series, as some have assumed – but to the 'Happy Hangman', Jock Rankin, Stirling's infamous 18th-century executioner, whom I portray on the Stirling GhostWalk, and who gives me my online moniker.

I hope you enjoy this random selection. If you do, tell your friends. If not...well, it's free, so no harm is done!

*Original columns edited by Christopher Brosnahan and Gillian Coyle at
GeekPlanetOnline.Com*

How The Hangman Got His Groove Back



Barry's Dead?

(c) 1986 DC Comics

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single geek in possession of a column, must be in search of a gimmick...or, at the very least, a good by-line.

I wear my ironic anorak with *pride*. That said, it came as something of a surprise to be asked, some years back, to opine for your delectation and delight on matters genre-related for the GeekPlanetOnline website.

Put simply, I didn't have *great* Sci-Fi credentials.

Oh, as a bright-eyed, bushy tailed young quon, I could have quoted screeds of script from *Star Trek*, and confidently quibbled over continuity quirks in the mythology of *Dr Who*. And I did. Often. I may not have known my Nine Times Table, but was contentedly aware of *Gallifrey's* interspatial co-ordinates in relation to Galactic-Zero-Centre (well, you *never know* when that kind of information will prove invaluable). I gorged myself on pastry-engineer turned scribbler 'Skylark' Smith's delightfully doughy daydreams. I cracked my teeth on Harry Harrison's *Stainless Steel Rat* novels, and got sand in my metaphorical arse-crack mulling over *Frank Herbert's Dune*. I learned the act of fine fictive dining through the three-course delight that was, is, and shall be ever more *Lord of the Rings*. I was voracious. I lived and breathed *Star Wars*, on it's first release, and my mother commented - as the alien Mothership arrived at the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* - that they'd probably come to take me *home* (Thanks, Mum!). Hell, I even watched every episode of *Space Cops*. That's dedication. Or possibly masochism.

My great passion, though, was *comics*.

Well, not *originally*. As a *very* young child with an advanced reading age I utterly *loathed* the funny-animal/cheeky-brat titles that dominated the British market in the early '70s – *Topper*, *Beezer*, *Beano* and *Dandy* –and, worse still, the true-blue, gleefully xenophobic

dross of *Warlord*, *Battle*, *Action* and *Hotspur*, war comics which, for years, were the only option for boys who had outgrown the slapstick sado-masochism of *The Bash Street Kids* – still fighting forty-year-old battles, and creating a generation of blokes whose command of German language and culture remains limited to occasional outbursts of ‘*Achtung!*’, ‘*Gott in Himmell!*’ and ‘*For you, Tommy, ze var is offur!*’

These were not for me. I had a taste for the *exotic*, even as a seven year old. My youthful heart yearned for the four-colour delights of the US imports – Marvels and DCs, mostly – brought over as ballast, and sold off at the quayside to newsagents.

These were heroes with amazing powers. Brave men, sexy women, marvellous mythologies, gloriously silly gadgets and gizmos, satellite HQs – ‘*flight rings*’, fer chrissakes! - able to face down all manner of menaces, mystic, monstrous or mundane. And they didn’t kill. And in between all the death-rays and thwarted caraclysms I learned about racism, drug abuse and corporate corruption reading Denny O’Neil’s *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* – subjects hardly ever offered up to young audiences in the squeaky-clean British media of the day. There were *ideas* here...not just nasty Teutonic types being bally-well blown to billy-o by plucky King-and-Country types.

I learned a lot from *Black Canary* and *Wonder Woman*, too – women in British comics were mums, girlfriends and teachers, burdensome beldames, battleaxes or victims - but *these* women were heroes every bit as powerful and courageous as their muscle-bound male compatriots. They just had their bumps in more pleasing places. When the *Fantastic Four* called themselves ‘*Imaginauts*’ you knew damned well that they *were*: anything was possible – *anything at all* – within those pages.

This was the early ‘70s. Crammed into the revolving racks at the back of corner-shops, you were lucky to find two consecutive issues of the same US title. I started making myself known to certain strategically-located proprietors, asking them to keep hold of particular issues of *The Flash* or *Detective Comics* if they chanced upon them. Mostly, though, like the work of any gumshoe seeking elusive prey on those mean streets, it was down to *leg-work*. That added to the exotic nature of the prize. If you *really* wanted to find out how the JLA escaped the ‘*Crisis on Earth-S*’ in #136 of their book (and I did, I *really* did) you had to run around every newsagent and grocer in town seaching for the next issue.

Marvel had their own black-and-white UK reprints, of course, and the stories printed there were probably better drawn and scripted than their imported DC cousins, but there was less of an *effort* required to get through the threshold of the *Mighty World of Marvel*, and, as you know, every true geek loves a quest.

Then came *2000AD*, the short-lived (but superior) *Starlord*, and less satisfying *Tornado*, and for a few years the best sci-fi and fantasy comics I was reading came from closer to home – ‘*Skizz*’, ‘*The Visible Man*’, ‘*The Ballad of Halo Jones*’, ‘*Ro-Busters*’.... The early ‘80s saw the so-called ‘*Marvel Revolution*’, where their half a dozen quality reprints were cruelly supplanted by twice as many insubstantial cut-and-paste knock-offs. It was a

cynical, unsatisfying move to make more use of the company's back-catalogue. I felt cheated. I felt *used*, goddammit!

My heart broken by my first love, I moved on...to university. I didn't look back.

As I grew older – my eyes dimmed and my hair, sadly, the only part of me that was even remotely bushy – my interest in fantastical fictions failed, and I embraced new forms of geekdom – literary, musical, historical and philosophical. I still enjoyed *The X-Files* (mostly), and the various *Star Trek* movies, but (aside from an acknowledgement of the universal truth that all the odd-numbered flicks were crap) found that I had lost my enthusiasm for the genre – or, rather, that I still *liked* a lot of what I used to like, but not to the obsessive, passionate degree that had typified my *former* fandom. I rarely, if ever, read modern sci-fi or fantasy – save for the occasional academic re-appraisal of Wells, Stoker or M.R. James.

As for comics. Pah! *Kids stuff*.

Then an odd thing happened.

On a dull, grey Edinburgh afternoon in the mid-'90s, I took shelter from the charming climate of Calidonia's capital in the city's *Forbidden Planet*. I perused the comic-racks in puzzlement. One cover in particular caught my eye: Wally West was (apparently) '*The Fastest Man Alive*'? Bollocks. Where was Barry Allen? Why was Kid-Flash wearing his Uncle's clobber? I must have been sufficiently slack-jawed to attract the attention of one of the staff, as I felt a consoling hand on my shoulder.

"Barry's dead!"

Eh?

I felt – ridiculous as it may seem – *guilty*. I had spent so many glorious hours in the company of this character, as a kid. And I *hadn't known* he was gone. It got worse: Hal Jordan was dead, too, as was Oliver (NO! *Not* Ollie!) Queen. Superman had died, too, apparently, but he got better. Feeling negligent, I picked up a bundle of comics – far too many, probably, but I was performing *penance*, so I *deserved* to pay the price of my betrayal.

So it started. I began to pick up *The Flash*, *Green Arrow* and *Green Lantern* – to see what exactly had happened to my childhood heroes. I started rummaging through back-issues for stories that would bring me up-to-speed with their histories and mythologies *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, *Emerald Dawn*, etc.. I rediscovered my love of Batman (purely platonic, I assure you). I discovered – or re-discovered – my favourite Silver and Golden Age characters again. *Those* were the days, I told myself - then realised that, as an adult, I'd been reading the adventures of Kyle Rayner and Wally West for far longer than I'd enjoyed those of Hal Jordan and Barry Allen as a kid.

Also in the bundle, picked up that stormy afternoon, were Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* – chosen simply because their titles were familiar (though the name Alan Moore did ring a bell). *Swamp Thing* begat *Hellblazer*;

Sandman begat *Death*, and *Sandman Mystery Theatre* and *Books of Magic* and *Black Orchid* and...well, *you get the idea*. Soon all this breathless begatting left me some glorious understanding of the infinite varieties of textual and visual narrative which, uniquely, the comic medium offers. Well...that and a monthly bill in excess of £250.

I read *everything* I could - crime, superheroes, horror, fantasy, political and autobiographical comics – and bored the ever-livin' crap out of my friends and family evangelising on their behalf. And all of these capes and cowls, swamp things, dream-weavers, gumshoes and femme fatales led me, in time, to *God*.

And he was good.

Bloody *brilliant*, in fact.

And he was the Way, the Truth and the Light. He *truly* sparked *The Spirit* in me, once more.

And his name was *Eisner*. *Will Eisner*.

And, let's face it, if you need it explained to you why Wond'rous Will is the Big Cheese of the comics pantheon then you have no damn right to call yourself a Geek...*buzzer off!*

And my passion has not abated – to which the shed I recently constructed and damp-proofed to accommodate my 16,500 back-issues, and the shelves which strain under my 600+ graphic novels can bear testimony.

So. Comics it is.

I'm still not a *huge* fan of sci-fi or fantasy in films, TV or pros, but I do love my little Mylar-bagged marvels, and *can* argue – hand on heart – why *Kitty Pryde* is one of the most culturally significant characters in modern publishing, take delight in the Victorian pop-culture references in Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, and rave about the post-modern deconstructive genius of *Kabuki* artist David Mack.

And that, gentle friends, is how – one rainy Sunday, fifteen years ago - The Hangman got his *Geek Groove* back...just so you know where I'm coming from should I choose to entertain, elucidate or bore you beyond the borderlands of endurance with my merry musings over the pages to come..

Fangs For The Mammary

It's all James V Hart's fault. And, even if it *isn't* I'm quite prepared to apportion blame to the hack whose rectal plundering of J. M. Barrie penned Spielberg's *Hook* – and encouraged him to foully finger the starfish of sensibility as Producer of Kenneth Branagh's unnecessary 1994 re-hash *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. There is a special Circle of Hell, undreamt of by Dante, reserved for people who use the term 'a modern reimagining of a classic tale' with such malicious abandon.



Carmilla (1872), the ORIGINAL Vampire Romance

And for *what* is Hart to blame (aside from using the genius of others to father his own cinematic bastards...obviously)?

Vampire Romance.

Vampire Sodding Romance. There's a wall of it in my local Waterstones. A wall – larger than Feminist Studies and Gardening sections combined – louring like the ravening unholy lovechild of Andrea Dworkin and Alan Tichmarch over more worthy genre fictions.

The modern vampire – since the 1819 debut of the first non-slaving folkloric vamp, *Lord Ruthven*, with the publication of Dr John Polidori's *The Vampyre* – has always had a bit of the raffish roister-doister about him.

How *could* it be otherwise: Ruthven, after all, was manifestly moulded upon that permanently priapic poet, George Gordon, Lord Byron. '*Mad, bad, and dangerous to know*', the conquests of this literary lothario included his half-sister (by whom he may have fathered a child), and the unfortunate Lady Caroline Lamb, who wasted away as she vainly pursued her indifferent amorist – Byron describing later encounters with her as like being '*haunted by a skeleton*'. A Lamb to the slaughter, she was in the thrall of an *emotional vampire* – an enigmatic outsider.

Ruthven was the shape of things to come. Rather than gumming ghoulishly at any passing mortal who caught their eye, the vampires of literature became aristocratic seducers and defilers.

Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella *Carmilla*, unfaithfully rendered as *The Vampire Lovers* by fang happy Hammer Studios in 1970, continued this transgressive theme – albeit rather more sympathetically than one might expect, given the strict sexual mores of the time – as the lonely heroine, *Laura*, is slowly seduced by the alluring, undead *Countess Mircalla*. The sexuality of the vampire is subtly, but unequivocally articulated. Genuinely shocking stuff, for 1872 - and genuinely romantic, too, in parts. Something Ruthven could never be.

The titular terror of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has his lusty 'Brides'- though that's a tag which is *never* attributed to them in the book itself –and leads us into other areas of transgression. They bear some resemblance to the Count, we're told – hinting, perhaps that they are of his *own* bloodline. Could it be that Big Daddy Drac is, like Mad Bad Byron, preying on his *own* kin to sate his *unnatural* appetites? They prey upon children - turning expected innate 'maternal instinct' on it's head - just as the Count preys upon Mina and Lucy, wilfully defiling innocence, and spreading their *contagion*. It's a *gleefully* unsubtle syphilis metaphor sadly lost to most modern audiences, but one guaranteed to chill the blood of Stoker's original readership, back in 1897.

Heaving bosoms, blood and penetration. In the 20th-century It all got *fearfully* Freudian. *Dracula* is, as a certain Mr King wrote, the '*ultimate zipperless fuck*'. In *Dracula's Daughter* - Universal's only *official* sequel to Todd Browning's classic, released in 1936, Vlad's little girl ponders on whether *nature* or *nurture* leads her to prey upon pretty women. James Whale's script was eviscerated by producers – less enlightened than *Carmilla*'s Victorian publishers, it seems– but it still remains sympathetic to the plight of the outsider. Unsurprising, perhaps, given Whales own struggles with his sexuality.

Christopher Lee leched his little heart out – thankfully it probably wasn't beating at the time– swishing his cape, flashing his gnashers, and getting stuck in to every available bit of bountifully bobbing boobage '60s and '70s cinema could throw at him. Sometimes it seemed that Chris was more interested in their cleavage than their corpuscles.

Anne Rice's vamps weren't amorous predators, *as such*, but the tiresome homo-erotic bonding of her characters has a distinct – if tiresomely repetitive – sexual charge.

Then came James V. Hart – the *git* - grafting a *reincarnated-lost-love* sub-plot onto the vampire mythos, that just...well...sucks!

'*I have crossed oceans of time to find you!*', whines Gary Oldman, in the time it would have taken randy ol' Ruthven to woo the winsome Winona right out of her corset, and it all gets angsty and unnecessary.

Soon *Buffy* was mooning over *Angel*, *Spike* was pining for *Buffy* (or *Drusilla*, or *Harmony* – he got around, that lad – must be one of Byron's boys), Tanya Huff's *Vicky Nelson* was cooing for *Henry Fitzroy* (another aristocrat, *Blood Ties*, *Sookie* for *Bill* and Stephanie Meyer's interminable *Twilight* twosome, *Edward* and *Bella*, became the poster-kids for *New Angst*. Even bloody *Blade* was getting in on the act – though *he*

does have the good manners and respect for tradition to make sure his doxies end up dead or dusted.

The monsters of Steve Niles's *Thirty Days of Night*, in comics and on the big screen, managed to keep their passion for humans on a reassuringly *culinary* footing, but most contemporary vamps don't even have the fangs for anything more than heavy necking. They are reduced to supporting roles as the 'bad boys' of teen romance: they have some *bad habits* and hang with the *wrong crowd*, but – hey – the love of a good girl can *save them from themselves* - like *The Wild One* with better dentition, and less mumbling). Hart and his unholy ilk have done what Van Helsing never could - nabbed Nosferatu, and rendered the poor ghouls gummy. Toothless.

2009 brought us *Lesbian Vampire Killers*, and I dearly wish it hadn't. Lipstick-Liliths are such a tired cliché. Lesbians – favoured fuel for fumbling adolescent onanism - just *aren't* shocking, any more, and the hellspawn harpies on display offer no danger...save, perhaps, the vague prospect of a popping bra-strap taking out the eye of one of the leery heroes. Give me a rusty spoon and I'd be happy to do that myself, as punishment for their inflicting this ordure on a viewing nation – and I'll merrily malky the screenwriter, too, for daring to name his vampy villainess *Carmilla!*). It doesn't even have the redeeming characteristic of being remotely sexy – unless, of course, your idea of erotic majesty is a busty bumper edition of *Nuts Magazine*. Mine isn't. Still, it revives the boobs-and-bloodletting formula which sustained the British film industry for two decades – and it's mercifully free of lovelorn teens.

All is not lost, though. Tomas Alfredson's 2008 screen adaptation of Lindqvist's *Let The Right One In* is a return to form for our favourite fiends. Hailed as a radical reinvention of the vampire story – dealing with issues of paedophilia, gender, violence and urban torpor in a grubby 1982 Stockholm suburb – it's actually very much in keeping with earlier traditions. It's characters are, willingly or otherwise, transgressive, subversive, seductive and *always* dangerous...just like the burgeoning *Vampire Romance* between it's protagonists, *Oskar* and *Eli*.

Horror with bite – which is exactly the way it should be.

One Of Us

I was twelve, I think, when I first fell for an older woman.

She was *thirteen*. Out of my league – and far more interesting and alluring than the *other* girls I knew. She went to a good school – exceptional, in fact. She hung with the really cool kids. It would never have worked, though – she only had eyes for some big dumb Russian exchange student.



Saw her again, not so long ago. She'd aged well. Wish I could say the same.

Kitty Pryde.

Okay, as a hormonal kid you might think that Marvel's early '80s run of *Uncanny X-Men* comics would have had more fulsome fillies to tickle my formative fancy. Storm was more exotic, and Phoenix more apt to set one's adolescent heart fluttering in contemplation of the Joy of Lycra. If you liked *Bad Girls* then Emma Frost And Her Amazing Gravity-Defying Bustier might have set your bells a-ringing. Glamour was the norm – who wants a minger in a cape, after all – but, Kitty...well, Kitty was *never* the norm. A skinny little thing, thrown into the frenzy of four-colour fantasy, even her 'phasing' ability wasn't hugely impressive. She was a nerdy teenager awed by the astonishing world of mutant super-heroics. Just like *us*, in fact. She was one of us. And, arguably the single most significant female comic character of the past half-century precisely *because* of her more commonplace qualities.

No?

Once upon a time Kid-Sidekicks were a staple of comics – Bucky, Robin, Sandy, Speedy, Jimmy Olsen – provided as a point-of-reference for the young readership. Girl-sidekicks were rare, but – even in the emancipated '80s - Kitty served a fairly traditional

function on her first appearance in *Uncanny X-Men* #129: her relationships with more established characters helped emphasise what made them distinctive within Marvel's pantheon of oddities. She was a 'kid sister' to Storm, an acolyte to Professor X – and the relationship between Wolverine and Rogue in David Fincher's *X-Men* film franchise is a mere echo of that enjoyed by Wolvie and his 'Pun'kin', way back when.

But she was more than a *foil*. Taking her name from an Art School chum of John Byrne, and based, loosely, on the personality of Julie, teenage daughter of his and writer Chris Claremont's fellow Marvel writers Walt and Louise Simonson, Kitty was very much an '80s teenager – not just the fancy of some middle-aged geek with a peculiar preoccupation for super-powered poppets.

Which leads us to fanboy Guru extraordinaire Joss Whedon - who claims that Kitty was the reason he agreed to write Marvel's *Astonishing X-Men* comic series. "*She was not a small influence on Buffy*" He said. "*I got to use her, and that sealed the deal.*" Actually, though, Kitty probably more closely resembles Buffy's winsome Wiccan chum, Willow. Anxious. Nerdy. Struggling to come to terms with strange new powers. And, of course, Jewish.

Weird. Until Kitty's January 1980 debut there were *no* Jewish super-heroes – despite so many creators of that faith – Siegel, Schuster, Kane, Schwartz, Lee, etc. – having made such a huge contribution to the medium

Like Willow, Kitty's sexuality was also a hot potato. Editors railed against the (really rather sweet) crush between the fourteen year-old and Peter 'Colossus' Rasputin, five years her senior, fearful that Comics Code critics would claim they were canoodling - which, under US law, would have constituted Statutory Rape of a Minor. It took a quarter of a century before the pair finally did the dirty (though it would be unfair to suggest that Whedon's greatest contribution to his favourite character was that he got her *laid*). There were rumours, too, that Claremont aimed to 'out' Kitty – that the X-Men's recurrent metaphors for issues of societal ignorance, rejection and persecution of outsiders would find further expression in the introduction of a *lesbian* character in a top-selling title – but this, too, though hinted at in various titles, was seemingly shot down by unenlightened Editors.

Coming back to comics after almost twenty years, I was glad to make Ms Pryde's acquaintance once more, but was briefly ticked off with the Buff-meister when I read his final *Astonishing X-Men* story-arc, '*Unstoppable*'. All Earth's other heroes incapacitated, Kitty uses all of her 'phasing' power to force a giant alien missile from colliding with the planet, but loses consciousness and cannot be saved as the missile continues intangibly speeding her off into space... And yet, the ending is *right*. It works. While the Earth's Mightiest Mutants stand around, drooling helplessly it is the geeky kid with the slightly naff powers – the one who was *one of us*, all along - who saves the day. Whedon made Kitty Pryde *matter*, again.

Good on ya, Pun'kin!

Farewell to Uncle Forry



The Granddaddy of Fandom

As a connoisseur of graphic fictions, possessed of a particular predilection for the *Creatures of the Night*, I was saddened to note the passing on December 4th 2008 of lifetime fantasy evangelist, Forrest J. Ackerman.

Agent, writer, publisher, co-founder, in 1932, of *The Time Travelers*, science-fiction's first fanzine, *Uncle Forry* – as he was affectionately known to felicitous fanboys – is probably best known as the editor and scribe of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Having proclaimed in that esteemed publication that ‘*A vampire a day keeps the doctor away!*’, it should be no surprise that his most enduring fictional creation combined elements of those things that entertained and intrigued him most: *Vampirella* - voluptuous alien blood-sucker from the planet Draculon (no, *really!*) – and star of the longest-lived vampire comic in publishing history, running from 1969-1983...and resurrected (appropriately enough) in 1991 fluttering on comely bat wings from publisher to publisher ever since.

A ‘*Bad Girl*’ heroine before there really was such a thing in comics, Vampirella was a naughty little necromantic nubile, garbed in a comely one-piece, and inspired by Jean-Claude Forest's space-faring sauce-pot, *Barbarella*. She hailed from a far-off realm where blood had replaced water as the life-sustaining liquid of choice, and preyed upon

the evil-doers of Earth. This ghoulish gamine was the template for many a contemporary horror-comic heroine – Lady Death, Selene, Witchblade.

Mind you, it's largely down to Uncle Forry that there *are* any contemporary horror comics.

Back in 1954 psychologist Frederick Wertham began a crusade against comic books, which he saw as an amoral blight upon the youth of America: crime comics glamorised violence and encouraged delinquency; Wonder Woman was a lesbian S&M freak; Batman and Robin – with their double-lives and fondness for Gotham's gaudy night-life – made readers *gay* (Catwoman is a *Fag-Hag*??). Particular scorn was aimed at the hugely popular horror and mystery comics of the day. That EC Comics' *Tales From the Crypt*, *Vault of Horror*, *Haunt of Fear*, *et al* imaginatively tackled issues of racism, sexism, drug abuse and social injustice alongside all their trademarked necromancy and disembowelling was all the more reason to shunt Max Gaines's little gems from the sight of whitebread Middle-America. Wertham's scathing *Seduction Of The Innocent* begat the conservative Comics Code, which assaulted distributors and retailers with hysterical entreaties to BAN THIS FILTH and THINK ABOUT THE CHILDREN, declaring that 'Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited'. By the end of 1954 the old horrors had been banished, replaced by the new and more alarming terror of a cozified Caped Crusader keeping company with *Batwoman* and *Batgirl* as well as Robin...with masked-mutt Ace the Bat-Hound completing the frightful faux-family unit.

There was still a market for the gory and the ghoulish, of course, and that audience was ably served by Ackerman's *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Appearing in 1958, it was *technically* a movie magazine, thus escaping the strictures of the Comics Code – even though it included black-and-white strips amongst its photos, reviews and articles. Intended as a one-shot, it was hugely popular – much to the surprise of Forry and publisher James Warren – and quickly became a regular fixture on news-stands throughout America. The format was repeated by Warren, with *Creepy* in 1964 and *Eerie* the following year.

Dell (appropriately enough) revived their long-dead *Dracula* title, it's hero a descendent of vampiric Vlad who supped a serum made from the brains of bats (Spidey got it easy!). Still, though, there were no *actual* horror comics, save for Gold Key's *The Munsters* TV spin-off, and their adaptation of ABC's gothic-soap, *Dark Shadows*. As for *Vampirella* – well, she had all the *trappings* of the classic vamp – hell, she even turned into a bat – but she was an *alien*, not a *monster*. She was also – much to the annoyance of mainstream publishers like DC Comics, whose anaemic *House of Mystery* anthology had been haemorrhaging readers to the deliriously unpredictable *Creepy* since the inception of the Code – *fearfully* popular.

So it was – after horrendous pressure – that the Comics Code was re-drafted, in January 1971: 'Vampires, ghouls and werewolves shall be permitted to be used when

handled in the classic tradition - such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and other high calibre literary works...read in schools throughout the world.'

'High calibre'? 'Schools'? A final proof of Ackerman's assertion, way back in the very first issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, that 'Monsters Are Good For You!'. Well we knew that all along!

He was a mover, a shaker, a master-manipulator, but Forrest J. Ackerman always knew what the fanboys wanted. Uncle Forry RIP...for *now*, anyway!

GOBLINS AND BEETLES AND BATS...OH MY!



...and the beginning of the end!

(c) DC Comics

Norman Osbourne killed Batman. Well, no, he *didn't*, obviously. It's still his *fault*, though. He played his part in pissing writer Alan Moore off, too. Bastard. You just can't trust businessmen.

Bear with me on this. Comics continuity is a many-headed beastie, a multi-headed metahuman hydra that eats its young and craps in the collective pop-cultural coffee pot. Everything is connected.

Our story starts with artist Steve Ditko - co-creator of the *Amazing* (and occasionally *Sensational*) *Spider-Man*, and one of the formative forces behind Stan 'The Man' Lee's '60s revival of *Timely Publishing*, now better known as Marvel Comics. His distinctive,

kinetic pencils and idiosyncratic layouts gave many of their early strips - particularly *Spider-Man* and *Dr Strange* - a unique energy. But all was far from happy in the *House of Ideas*. An adherent of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy, Ditko balked at Marvel's relatively liberal sensibility. Hey, it was the cool kid on the comics block, and eager to get down wit da Hep Cats, Daddio - this was the Swingin' Sixties, after all! It wasn't politics, though, that ultimately sent him stropping - it was Lee's decision to reveal the identity of the *Wall-Crawler's* arch nemesis, the *Green Goblin*, as industrialist *Norman Osbourne*. Ditko had set Osbourne up as a straw-man, never truly intending to reveal the alter-ego of his villain - and thus create an air of mystery around him. Stan disagreed. Steve walked.

He moved on (amongst other things) to a revival of the *Blue Beetle* - then a back-up strip in Carlton's *Captain Atom*. Emerging in the heyday of the Golden Age, *Blue Beetle* was once a major player in comics. Two-fisted fury, *Patrolman Dan Garret*, fought crime for more than a decade, from 1939, garbed in bulletproof chain-mail. He earned his own syndicated newspaper-strip, rendered by a young Jack 'King' Kirby, fronted a popular radio-serial, where, with the decline of the costumed mystery-man in the late '40s, he stuck around as the weekly host of 'True-Crime' tales. Moving from Fox Comics to the Charlton stable in 1964, the character was tweaked. *Dan Garrett* gained an extra 't' and a degree in archaeology, and attaining super-human powers courtesy of a mystical Egyptian relic - much like *Captain Marvel*, *Hawkman*, *Metamorpho*, *Element Girl* and *Dr Fate*. It was all terribly Silver Age. It was also *crap* - with the doughty Garrett facing up to the likes of *Praying Mantis Man*. Not comics wunderkind Roy Thomas's finest hour.

Debuting in 1967, Ditko's *Blue Beetle* scripts may have lacked Stan The Man's sass, but his hero - scientist *Ted Kord*, gaining *Garrett's* mantle - was every bit as feverishly outlandish as *Spidey*. He quickly graduated into his own title, with another Ditko strip, *The Question* (co-scripted by Dan Glanzman) running as a back-up. It's hardly to Charlton's credit that, though popular, the series was canned after only five issues.

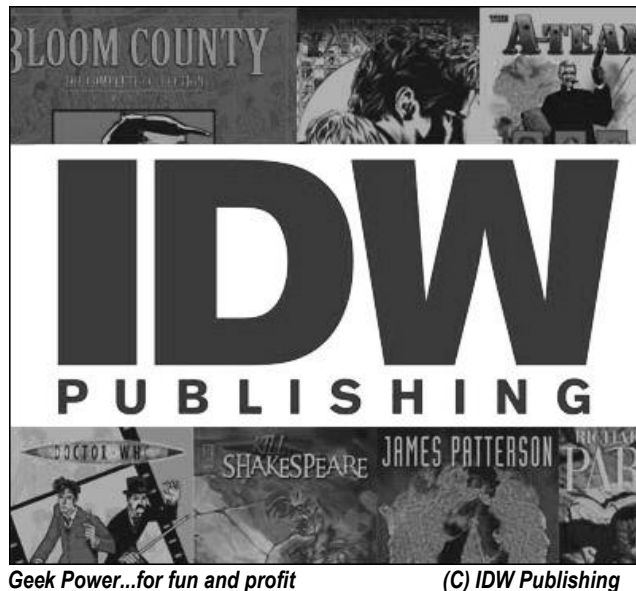
British comics' writer Alan Moore, enjoying his first real flush of success writing for the American market, had originally wanted to use these Charlton characters - along with *Captain Atom*, *Thunderbolt*, *Peacemaker* and *Nightshade*, then recently acquired by DC - as the heart of 1986's seminal *Watchmen*. DC, wary of squandering new properties on an *experimental* project, insisted that *new* characters be created. *Blue Beetle* became *Nite-Owl* (complete with Golden Age mentor) and *The Question* - with tinges of another, similarly reactionary Ditko creation, *Mr A - Rorschach*.

Ownership of these characters has long been a source of discord between Moore and DC. Creators' contracts state that if the characters are not used or the collected edition reprinted for a year, rights of ownership revert to Moore and artist Dave Gibbons. They have not, however, been out of print since the comic was first released in 1986. Twenty years later Moore said of DC, 'You have managed to successfully swindle me, and so I will never work for you again'. Interestingly, these hostilities would not have arisen had the writer been able to use the *original* Charlton characters, as planned.

Back to the bug. From 1986 Ted Kord enjoyed considerable popularity in his own 24 issue series, and as a member of Giffen and DeMatteis's *Justice League* - more often than not in comedy partnership with *Booster Gold*. His murder by *Maxwell Lord*, in the portentously titled maxi-series *Countdown to Infinite Crisis* shocked many – as did *Wonder Woman*'s execution of his killer, in another *Series-Destined-To-Change-Everything*, *Final Crisis* (which wasn't...an *Infinite* crisis was already in the offing). This, in turn, led to *Batman*'s journey of self-discovery and near-death experience in 52 - events which fed into Grant Morrison's controversial *Batman: RIP*. Yup. The Dark Knight was done in by a Glaswegian vegetarian. Didn't see that one coming.

So, if you feel like a Ditkoesque strop against DC for killing the Caped Crusader (albeit temporarily), remember...it's really *all* Norman bloody Osborne's fault.

INDEPENDENTS DAY



An ambitious Geek should never be underestimated. If he can find two or three other like-minded anorak-wearers willing to pool their energies and resources, then anything can happen. Admittedly what usually happens is that they argue about whether *Babylon 5* or *Deep Space Nine* was better until they are blue in the face, but sometimes – just sometimes – all that imagination can be channelled rather more productively. Such confabulations spawned Fandom as we know it today, after all, and how nearly fifteen years Messrs Ted Adams, Robbie Robbins, Chris Ryall and Matthew Ruzicka channelled their collective interests in video gaming, movies, tv, comics, and trading cards into forming *IDW – Idea and Design Works*.

They weren't *expected* to survive, of course. Many comic-dealers confidently predicted that they were just another *here-today bankrupt-tomorrow* hobbyist outfit. That they not only *endured*, but were named Diamond Comic Distributors' '*Publisher of the Year*' for three consecutive years (2004-2006), is remarkable - especially as their early efforts

were in the often *less than lucrative* field of Mature Readers horror fare. Early output included Ashley Woods experimental *Popbot* and *Lore*, Steve Niles brutal reworking of vampire lore, *30 Days of Night*, and Ben Templesmith *Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse*. These were limited-run titles, and critically acclaimed - sadly a combination which usually provides the financial kiss-of-death for any nascent publisher in a super-powered industry bloodied by the asset-stripped stiff of those deluded enough to imagine that artistic integrity, originality and innovation were enough to endure.

As if.

Mark Alessi, founder of *CrossGen* – a near-contemporary of *IDW*'s – now *he* was a hobbyist. Eschewing clichéd cape-and-cowl high-jinks for high-concept tales of fantasy and adventure – amongst them Barbara Kesel's magical coming-of-age tale *Meridian*, Ron Marz and Greg Land's sword and sorcery epic *Sojourn*, and Chuck Dixon and Steve Dixon's piratical *El Cazador* – the Florida-based entrepreneur drew upon top-of-the line talents. He innovated - producing pocket-sized anthologies, *Edge* and *Forge*, which profiled his best-selling titles – marketing them not through comic-shops, but *directly* through retailers *Borders* and *Barnes and Noble*. He set up no less than *eleven* subsidiary companies to develop interests in educational and overseas publishing and multimedia. In short, *CrossGen* was doing everything we'd always wanted mainstream comic publishers to do: taking risks and scorning the mainstream; letting creators dictate content; actively seeking out not just new genres and formats, but entirely new markets and means of connecting with them.

A fanboy's dream.

Pity it bombed, really.

A labyrinth of legal legerdemain saw *CrossGen*'s assets purchased by Disney for a measly million bucks, leaving many creators angry and unpaid to this day. The agreed credit/refund deal established with booksellers for returned compendia decimated the company's operating capital, investors panicked – and Alessi found he had nothing but 'product' to fall back on. A damned fine 'product', true - but not a big enough Brand Name for that to make *any* difference. Alessi had some great recipe ideas, but he threw them all in the pot at once. He's now CEO of TAO Solutions, whose website boasts that they '*make companies more efficient, productive and accountable*'.

Oh, the *irony*.

IDW's founders were not merely entrepreneurial fanboys-on-a-mission - they included '*entertainment executives*' in their ranks. Now, *normally* those words would send any self-respecting Geek with faith in the principles of artistic integrity running for the hills. But hold on...risking their own money, they *took their time*. They established their presence quietly, developing a broad corporate rubric - encompassing customised logo, character and concept design, multimedia, online and print style guides, etc. – long before their first comics were ever published. They didn't just know *what they liked*, they

knew *how*, and *where*, and *when* to get the most from their 'product'. From a handful of titles in 2002, they now command at least 5% of the comic market.

They *still* have a fine reputation for producing quirky, quality, eclectic fare – current offerings including John Watkiss's *Sparrow*, Ashley Wood's *World War Robot*, and Bob Fingerman's post-apocalyptic *From The Ashes* – supplemented, and, no doubt, subsidised by their current area of specialisation, the licensed adaptation of more mainstream media, such as *Star Trek*, *Dr Who*, *Transformers*, *Speed Racer*, *Astro Boy* and gaming spin-offs like *Castlevania*.

Have they 'sold-out'? Far from it. If anything they've consolidated their relationship with those creators and audiences who helped establish their distinctive presence in the marketplace, and further secured that presence by tapping into other, more lucrative, fandoms – just as *Vertigo* is cushioned by its corporate cape-and-cowl cousin, *DC*. Also, aside from reprints of older strips whose licenses they now retain – Gibbons, Mills and Wagner's delightful '70s *Dr Who Weekly* strips, for example – *IDW* honours the industry that spawned it through the *Library of American Comics* imprint, bringing restored prints of Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy*, *Little Orphan Annie* and Milt Caniff's wonderful *Terry and the Pirates* to modern audiences.

Creativity, imagination and profit in one package. Who'd have thunk it?

UNTOLD LEGENDS...

As I've mentioned previously, my early comic fandom manifest itself in my willingness to wander far and wide in search of any newsagent or general store with a ratty revolving magazine-rack which might stock my favourite titles – *Batman*, *Detective Comics*, *Justice League of America* and *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. It was a random process: chancing upon consecutive issues of any comic in one shop was a rare delight – but not impossible.

During the Christmas holidays in 1980 I was thrilled to find *two* issues - #2 and #3 - of a *new* *Batman* comic. Of course what I *didn't* know – as I snapped them up, with the intention of rack-rummaging high and low in search of the fabulous first issue in the days that followed – was that the comic in question would become significant, both in the history of publishing, and my own fandom.

The book was *The Untold Legend of the Batman* - a by-the-numbers compilation of key events in Silver Age Caped Crusader continuity by Len Wein, expressively rendered by my favourite Bat-artist at the time, Jim Aparo. Its real distinction lay in that it was the *very first* comic mini-series.



The missing piece...

(c) 1980 DC Comics

To herald this startling innovation DC formulated *another* first – variant 6” x 9” digest editions of each of the three issues, complete with blister-packed audio-adaptation, and featuring a (not-terribly) catchy theme-song:

*‘Thieves — Look out! Thugs — Beware!
Killers — Watch out! Wrong-doers — Don’t dare!
In the deepest dark of night, he waits for the danger!
One man’s holy fight: Evil’s only true avenger!’*

Of course, such sense-shattering cassette-tastic delights were undreamed of by the likes of little me, as I ruffled through the mundane mix of puzzle-books and crossword-compendia stuffed into the racks in my local *Spar*. I put the comics away, safely, on a shelf – as was my habit (still is, incidentally) with incomplete series – to be read *only* when I finally tracked down the elusive introductory issue. And I *would*. I was sure of that. Sadly, I lacked the skills of the World’s Greatest Detective, and the end of the Christmas holidays curtailed my free time to search. The object of my quest escaped me.

Years passed, and I lost interest in comics. I finished school, moved on to university – and my once-precious hoard of comics fell victim to my infant nephew’s desire to paint the world with snot and tomato soup.

Of course, I got my geek-groove *back, eventually*. From 1995 I picked up new comics on spec at the Forbidden Planet in Glasgow or Edinburgh, before settling into regular orders with a dealer closer to home – and who remains my main supplier. These days he delivers my stash, weekly, to my door – a stark contrast to my youthful shop-trotting efforts!

In recapping missed mythologies, I sought the aid of the late Pete Root, proprietor of Glasgow’s *City Centre Comics*. Pete resourced runs of *Swamp Thing*, *Animal Man* and sundry strange and wonderful *Vertigo* mini-series for me, and – *Gods be praised!* - brought Will Eisner to my attention. I came to think of him as a sort of grumpy Comic-Yoda. He loathed Chuck Austen with an incandescent fury, and obsessively anal fanboys - feverish in their critique of contradictory continuities regarding Logan’s love life might easily find themselves hurled bodily into the street with the earnest entreaty “*Buy something, or get a life – either would make me happy!*”. For all his growl he was a genuine evangelist for the medium, and his enthusiasm was infectious. His Boxing Day ‘Half-Price Sale’ was a regular fixture – and much anticipated relief - on my route home after visiting my family for Christmas, each year.

During one such Festive foray to the family home, in 1997, I found myself looking through old bits-and-bobs belonging to my dearly departed Dad. There, pressed flat amidst a bundle of neglected LPs, on the highest shelf of the hall cupboard, I found the long forgotten - and still *unread* - issues of *The Untold Legend of the Batman*. Next day, struggling against the mindless hordes of seasonally stressed shoppers on the mean streets of my Glasgow, I popped I on Pete Root’s little emporium.

I mentioned my find. “*Oh...*” quoth he “*You’ll be wanting the first issue, then?*”...and took it, bagged and graded, from the spot on the wall above his cash register it had occupied – completely unnoticed by me – for the previous two years.

Well, how could I refuse? After all, I *said* I would, didn’t I...it just took me seventeen years longer than I *thought* it would.

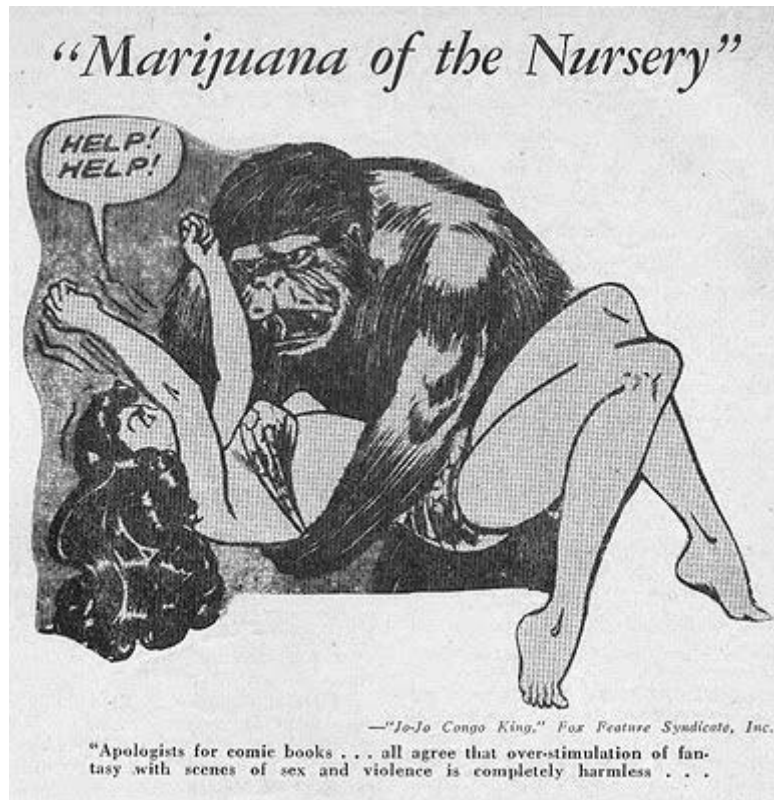
It was *crap*, by the way...but that was never the point.

THE BOGEY MAN

A couple of columns back I heaped scorn upon the name of Dr Fredric Wertham, the German-born psychiatrist and author, whose 1954 tome *The Seduction of the Innocent* damned comics as a corrupting influence on America’s youth, and led to a hysterical hobbling of the comic industry and the imposition of censorship through the *Comics Code Authority*. He’s the Fiend of the Funny Papers, the Comic-Book Bogey-Man –

lampooned as John Kovalic's *Dr Blink, Superhero Shrink*. and in the pages of Karl Kesel's *Harley Quinn* and Sergio Aragones's *Fanboy*.

For comic-buffs and Geek-culture aficionados, he's the Bogey-Man. An interfering self-righteous interfering prig.



Some of Dr W's theories were a little....odd!

Hmmm. Perhaps I haven't been fair.

A student of revolutionary German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, Wertham moved to the USA in 1922 - quickly establishing a distinguished reputation in what would now be termed forensic psychology. He testified in the 1935 trial of Albert Fish, the infamous 'Brooklyn Vampire', whose crimes combined paedophilia, murder and cannibalism - and who boasted of a *hundred* victims (but was tried for only *three*). Fish was clearly mentally ill, and the young shrink described him as the most deranged human being he had ever encountered, noting that the killer's own childhood abuse was the most likely source of his psychosis - a highly unfashionable view, at the time. He was a close friend of *Invisible Man* author, Ralph Ellison, and crusaded against racial inequality and social injustice, lobbying to open a clinic tailored to the specific needs of New York's black community. His work detailing the harmful social effects of racial segregation was cited by the defence in the landmark *Brown Versus the Board of Education* trial, in 1954.

1954.

The same year *Seduction of the Innocent* was printed.

But this *hardly* sounds like the reactionary right-winger parodied by Will Eisner as 'school psychologist, Dr Wolfgang Worry, conducting his weekly book-burning'.

Yet isn't *this* the author of such scaremongering tracts as 'The Psychopathology of Comic Books' and the wonderfully titled 'Horror In The Nursery' (both 1948), which blamed all of society's ills – 'reefer-madness', truancy and, no doubt, the sinking of the Lusitania - on the humble funny-papers? Well, yes...*and no*. Wertham had serious – and utterly sincere – issues not *just* with comics, but popular media as a whole. His views were informed by experience treating troubled teens such as 'Gino', an East Side seventeen year old whose murderous impulses – fuelled, he claimed, by fantasy-violence in comics, radio serials and gangster flicks - were recounted, semi-fictionalised, in his 1941 book *Dark Legend: A Study In Murder*.

Some of Wertham's theories are clearly *loopy*. He saw lewd images of female nudity and in every sketch of tree or shadow - but that's Freudians for you. He saw *Superman* as a fascistic figure imposing his will on the world at large through force. *Batman and Robin* were gay. *Obviously*. *Wonder Woman's* strength and self-reliance (and her hailing an island of ageless and unutterably gorgeous girlies) made *her* a lesbian - and her strips featured thinly disguised bondage metaphors.

To be fair, he was right about the bondage.

Wondy's creator, William Moulton Marston, freely admitted as much. Submission to benevolent authority was necessary, he insisted, for a peaceful society, and 'submitting to other people cannot possibly be enjoyable without a strong erotic element.' Marston's comments (and his penchant for constantly binding and gagging his comely heroine and her gal-pals at every opportunity) *really* didn't help the case for comics, and might even have supported Wertham's view that they should only be available to more mature readers - aged fifteen or older.

Why did he pick on the Capes?

Oddity, probably. In the late '40s and early '50s, though, there weren't many of them left. Magazine-racks were dominated by *Horror*, *True Crime* and *Western* titles. His complaint that printing violent scenes next to advertisements for airguns and hunting knives was ill-advised, is valid. It certainly wouldn't be allowed today. He criticised creators' 'morbid fascination' with themes such as 'injury to the eye'. Fair enough. Sensationalist scenes, such as that in *Plastic Man* creator Jack Cole's 1947 *True Crime Comics* gloriously titled strip 'Murder, Morphine and Me' – where a hypodermic hovers threatening over the tearful eye of the heroine – *remains* unsettling, even sixty years on. Comics were disposable, destructive trash. In *Seduction of the Innocent* he wrote 'I have never come across any adult or adolescent who...would ever dream of keeping any of these 'books' for sentimental or other reasons.'

Ha! He should see my bookshelves!

That the industry was barely a quarter-century old, and that the early fanboys – Alex Toth, Joe Orlando, Carmine Infantino and their ilk – were only *then* emerging as its key creative forces, never seems to have *occurred* to him. While he remained critical of the glorification and sexualisation of violence in the medium, he *did* – much to his credit – recant his view that they were utterly without merit, commenting in his final published work, 1974's *The World of Fanzines*, that comic fandom represented a '*constructive and healthy exercise in creative drives*'. Invited to attend that year's *New York Comic-Art Convention* he discovered that the fans themselves were not *quite* so open minded, or forgiving – and was booed off-stage.

To some extent that strikes me as ungrateful. Yes, the furore fuelled by *Seduction of the Innocent* damaged the industry, albeit *briefly*, and forced us to endure a drearily domestic decade of *Two-Point-Four Bat-Children*, but it is worth considering whether the Silver Age super-heroic revival – the foundation of most enduring comic-mythologies – would have occurred had publishers not been forced to seek alternatives to halted *Horror* or *True Crime* titles. Would Stan Lee have been inspired to revive *Timely* as a more radical and *Marvelous* alternative to the cozified cosmos of *DC*? Would Uncle Forry and the boys at *Warren* have had a reason to become so bold and inventive had their *Creepy* not been forced *so cunningly* to circumvent the strictures of the Comics Code? I don't think so. Quite accidentally – and it would annoy the crap out of him to say so – I think Fredric Wertham actually *saved* modern comics – and for that credit *is* due.

GLAD TO BE GEEK

A young woman of my acquaintance 'came out' to her friends and family, recently.

Her revelation came as a shock to some and prompted hoots of scorn from others. Denial was a common response: it was a *phase*, a *faddish folly* that she'd *grow out of*. Workmates thought to wither her with every scornful glance. She was a teacher, after all. What if she foisted her fancies upon unsuspecting youth? Others were blamed for leading the lass astray – tempting her with exotic glimpses of worlds beyond the mundane monochrome-reality she was used to.

Jesus! Telling them she was gay was *nothing* compared to owning up that she was a comic geek.

My fault, I suppose, for introducing my former flatmate to the funny-papers.

Just the odd issue of *Catwoman*, to start with, then an occasional trade-paperback – not *too much*, you understand, nothing she *couldn't handle* – but that led to the *hard stuff* – *Swamp Thing*, *Sandman*, Bill Willingham's *Fables* and the like. Even now she's happily set up home with her girlfriend, my pernicious pop-culture influence persists, it seems, as she shamefully slopes off to collect her secret comic stash from me every few weeks.

I got back into comics comparatively late in life – happily hooked by the ever expanding mythologies of icons I'd loved as a child. By then I had tallied several postgraduate

degrees and a teaching qualification. I'm so academically accomplished, in fact, as to be virtually unemployable outside the entertainment industry. Yet as soon as I mention in genteel society that I am a comic-buff I sense a certain cultural *sniffyness* – as though I had interrupted a recital by *Ladysmith Black Mambazo* requesting a quick chorus of 'Camptown Races'.

Another former flatmate – a postgrad Guardian-reading left-leaning bleeding heart liberal like myself – almost took it as a personal *affront* that I 'wasted' my time on comics. She could not comprehend how *anyone* could be as content reading *Batman* as Buchan, Byron or Burgess.



Geek and PROUD!

I don't see a distinction.

I never have.

I've always been a sucker for a good story – that particular craft has, after all, been my bread-and-butter for nearly twenty years, as an actor, storyteller and scriptwriter – and, so long as I am intrigued, entertained or simply encouraged to laugh my arse off, I don't care what *wrapping* binds the disparate components of plot and character together.

Critics claim that comics are trivial, formulaic and aimed at an adolescent mentality with the attention-span of a ketamined carbuncle - brain-candy fantasies populated by balloon-breasted bad-girls and muscle-bound mystery men. Very true...now pop down to the bookshop and tell me if a million miles of literal or metaphorical shelving separate Dan Brown and Anthony Burgess. It would be foolish, too, to dismiss the cinema of Francois Truffaut because you have experienced the asinine antics of *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*, and assume by association that *Battleship Potemkin* is cut from the same cinematic cloth. Yet, in the mainstream media comics – *all* comics – are still defined according to the 'Zap!' 'Kapow!' clichés of the '60 *Batman* TV show.

Holy Reductive Stereotypes!

Every medium is dominated by undemanding tripe – films, books, TV shows, computer games, songs, stories and shit-stirring tabloids many of us would never *consider* ‘wasting’ our time on. That hardly offends me. Put simply, shit *sells*. That’s fine by me – as the revenue it generates serves to subsidise publishers, film-makers and artists I *do* enjoy...or, alternatively, to inspire them to greater, more original efforts.

And, to be honest, sometimes – just sometimes – you *need* a bit of mindless ordure. Existential introspection is all very well, but occasionally one does require the gratuitous delight of seeing a big clown-faced kook kicked in the ‘nads.

Yet we see cultural *guilt-by-association*. Critics canned the 2004 *Catwoman* flick as *kitty-litter* largely because it conformed to *type*. It was a ‘comic-book movie’: silly, sexist, disposable dross. Unfair: Minghella’s acclaimed *Road To Perdition* and Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence*, emerged from similar sources, as did Zwigoff’s *Ghost World*. No, *Catwoman* was crap for the same reasons *most* movies are crap...bad acting, poor direction and a shit script. Bad Art.

Like cinema, comics have indie-hits, blockbusters and art-house indulgences. I can laugh at a *Carry On* film, cheerily chomp popcorn in time to Arnie’s Kalashnikov, and ponder over what particular pharmacological cocktail made David Lynch the way he is. They *all* contribute to the cultural currency that defines my cinematic tastes.

Similarly, I enjoy the crowd-pleasing modern mythologies of *Wonder Woman*, *Daredevil* and the like — their adventures played out on a canvas every bit as broad, complex and utterly, unapologetically *ludicrous* as that enjoyed by the Olympian pantheon of old. If I’m feeling quirky (I do like a nice quirk, once in a while) I might savour Terry Moore’s *Echo* – or seek out David Mack’s spellbinding deconstruction of comic-heroism, *Kabuki*, the searing political satire of Brian Wood’s *DMZ* or the playful whimsy of Jeff Smith’s *Bone* – titles as *stylistically*, *thematically* and *artistically* different from one-another as they are from the populist pap which dominates the comic industry ...and just about every bookshelf, TV or cinema screen on four continents.

I was lucky, I think, to return to comics *when* I did, and in the *way* that I did. At the same time that I was re-introduced to familiar favourites from my youth I was encouraged to read thoughtful, informed culturally and artistically diverse works by creators eager to experiment with traditional forms, legacies and mythologies and develop their own distinctive visual and textual styles. Surely that is what all *Art* is about.

I’m not arrogant enough (yet) to assume that I’m the smartest-person-in-the-room, or that my critical faculties are the only ones worthy of consideration – but my cultural experience is diverse enough and my interests sufficiently eclectic for my tastes to be informed, and for me not to be ashamed for one second of a medium that continues to thrill, excite and entertain me...and which has hardly started to demonstrate it’s potential as both popular culture and, yes, High Art.

I’m a comic-geek, and I’m proud. Anyone doesn’t like that...that’s *their* problem.

MAN OF STRAW

"Everyone looks up to you. They listen to you. If you tell them to fight, they'll fight. But they need to be inspired. And let's face it, 'Superman'... the last time you really inspired anyone was when you were dead."

Not the kind of thing a mild-mannered man in tights wants to hear during a moment of Crisis (*Infinite*, *Final*, or otherwise), particularly not from an obsessive-compulsive freak dressed as a flying rodent. *Thanks, Bruce.*

Still, he had a point.



Fallen idol

(c) 1992 DC Comics

Superman emerged as an exercise in adolescent wish-fulfilment: the creative offspring of Cleveland geeks, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster – possessing the confidence, power and prowess the pair so desperately craved. He was an orphan, an immigrant, an outsider. He was also more than a smidgin Messianic – sent by his father in the sky to save mankind in it's darkest hour: raised in the Kansas dustbowl of the Great Depression. The whole *Death and Resurrection* thing wouldn't come along for another four decades, but this boy's antecedents were still boldly biblical back in-the-day.

Fair enough. What kid *wouldn't* like to fly, or to do some righteous smiting in an Old Testament stylee? Who *doesn't* crave respect, admiration, and the moral certainty necessary to understand that with great power comes great responsibility...? Sorry, that's the *other* guy, isn't it?

Quentin Tarantino has his eponymous evildoer in 2004's *Kill Bill 2* comment that "*Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent. He's weak... he's unsure of himself... he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race.*" Really, Quentin? So the small-town down-home morality of the Big Blue Boy-Scout, is a contemptuous bluff? So it was a *coincidence* that it was Clark, not Superman, who eventually got the girl of his dreams?

Nah! Missed the point, Quentin.

The artifice of the *Clark* persona may well have originated in the adolescent wish-fulfilment fantasies of his creators - he only *pretended*, like Jerry, Joe and the rest of us, to be weak and wimpy because those closest to him might be harmed if his foes found out how Super he *really* was – but he is, at heart, *Ma* and *Pa Kent's* little boy. Okay, he's a solar-powered alien – but, without getting too deeply into the Nature-or-Nurture argument, all adopted kids have *some* baggage.

Clark stopped being a bumbler around the same time I started reading comics – my first story, incidentally, being 1971's '*The Pied Piper of Steel*', where he left the *Daily Planet* and became WGBS's '*first roving TV reporter*' (a '*super reporter*'...naturally). Subsequent revisions, in Byrne's 1986 *Post-Crisis* revamp *Superman: The Man of Steel*, Loeb and Sale's *Superman For All Seasons* a decade later, and Waid and Yu's 2003 *Birthright*, have all established that it's *Clark's* experience and personality that informs and defines Kal-El/Superman's character. Interestingly, Batman considers his *Super Friend* unworldly not because he's...er...from *another world*, but because his small-town sensibility makes him '*naïve*' – but is envious of his chum's close connection with the Kents - as expressed, touchingly, in Karl Kesel's 1999 *World's Finest* mini-series. Tarantino's skewed assessment of Supes could probably be more accurately applied to poor old Brucie.

The Kents connect their boy with humanity and mortality, as with the death of Pa Kent in Donner's 1978 *Superman: The Movie*: "*All those things I can do. All those powers...and I couldn't even save him.*"

Yet, for all his genuinely iconic status in the history of fan-boy fantasy fulfilment – he hasn't been cool, or inspirational for a long time. Unsurprising, really. He has always been an exemplar of heroic duty - of '*Truth, Justice and the American Way*' – questionable virtues in an age where moral absolutes are so often subject to the ethical obfuscations of legislators and pundits. Determined to *do the right thing*, he lacks the pro-active pragmatism of his peers.

He became part of the furniture. A big comfy chair. Not as attractive as the more fashionable fixtures and fittings, but too awkward to dump. We took him for granted.

So... DC offed him, in 1992's *Death of Superman* event. *Doomsday*, an amoral, unreasoning alien berserker – the antithesis of the controlled, compassionate Kansas farm-boy – tears across America laying waste to cityscape, farmland and a host of heroes. Duty calls, and Superman leaves a Q&A session with an audience of cynically disinterested teens (oh, the subtlety) for what he soon realises will be an unwinnable battle.

These scripts are replete with comic book cliché - *"It stops here, Mister! 'The JLA has already fallen and there are too many lives in jeopardy. It's up to me!'" "For Lois, and Jimmy and the entire city, I've got to put this guy away while I still can!"* – run of the mill comic-book melodrama...or it *would* be, if it wasn't the ever-earnest *Man of Steel* delivering them. We know *he* means them. *Without question*. He's *that* kinda guy! By this point, we *also* known something *really* bad is coming. Could it really be *that* bad? Could he, of all heroes, fall?

And he did. Fans were stunned. Heroes faltered. Others were inspired to step up, to fill his shoes (As *if!*). The media flapped like that big tattered cape, forlornly fluttering on the desolate cover of 'Superman' #75.

Why? Why did we care? Was it that our surety that he *couldn't* be killed - or was it that, deep down, we knew that he *shouldn't*...that an utterly altruistic ideal of heroism may not be *in vogue*, but is an *ideal* nonetheless, and one well worth preserving. DC's ploy worked: by taking away the comfy chair and putting it in storage for the best part of a year we realised what a valuable, sturdy piece of furniture it was, and why we had kept it for so long. He inspired, again.

What saved Superman wasn't just that *Doomsday* reminded us of his mortality. It was more than that. He was more like us – the ordinary Joes (and Jerrys) – than ever, particularly as writers focussed more and more on that other mundane mutt, Mr Kent.

Writers all too often forget who Superman is.

Simple. He's us. Always has been. Us...but on a *really* good day! And the more like us he is, the more accessible and inspirational role model he becomes.

UNDER MIRKWOOD

On the 20th of November 1975 *Generalissimo Francisco Franco* - described by 'Tricky' Dicky Nixon as '*a loyal friend and ally of the United States*' - ruthless Fascist dictator of Spain, and all-round reactionary right-wing git, died at the ripe old age of 82. Other than the date of his departure from this weary waking world of ours, he plays no part in the tale that follows: I'm just glad that the murderous old bastard died on a day that was significant to me.

Mind you, on the date in question Young Hangman was by no measure of the imagination *Happy*. Perhaps news of dictatorial demise might have improved my mood (I was an odd kid), but awareness of that event eluded me, at the time. Suffering a particularly nasty bout of psoriasis, nine year old me (well, I'd be nine in a few days) was itchy, scratchy and sleepless. Red-raw and bleary-eyed – my comics and school-books all raggedly re-read, and my mother's 'Peoples' Friend' offering no hope of salvation - I fretted around the family flat in dead of night in search of distractions.

And thus began a journey that was to occupy much of my time in the months and years that followed...



Last Train to Midgard (c) Jimmy Cauty

But I'm getting ahead of myself...

My prospective (as he was, at that time) brother-in-law fancied himself as a bit of a hippy. A 'free spirit'. He *wasn't*, of course – *true* Flower-Children don't grow up to be Tax Inspectors. His own path to the 'world-consciousness' seemed to involve nothing more than buying the odd Prog-Rock album, and evangelising to my sister and her friends about *rad* books he'd never read. Amongst these were Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which he'd lent to my senior sibling – along with a gift of the glorious

Jimmy Cauty (later of the *KLF* and *The Orb*) *Rings* poster, which she'd shunted aside in favour of a full length print of *Bryan Ferry* in full Glam-Rock Garb. The '70s were a distressing era, on many levels. The books, likewise, were bundled together, gathering dust in a damp hall-cupboard...which is where I found them.

As soon as I saw the dragon on the front cover of *The Hobbit* I was hooked – though I must confess to being a little disappointed by the childish tone of the storytelling. Initially, anyway. I was a precocious brat with an advanced reading age, and had the imagined realms of *Middle-Earth* - of the *Orcs* and the *Hobbits* and the *Elves* – not intrigued me, more through their oddity than anything else, I'd have probably given up on it, then and there. Before I knew it, the sun was rising, *Bilbo Baggins* had triumphed over smug old *Smaug* and stolen away poor, wretched *Gollum's* precious trinket. I had read my first fantasy novel – and, for the first time (but by no means the last), performed my first all-nighter, reading a book in one sitting.

By the following evening I had appropriated the *Cauty* print, and was sitting down to start work on *The Fellowship of the Ring* – to hoots of derision from my would-be in-law: *it wasn't a kid's book!* A more challenging narrative, it took me about a week to finish it, then moved on to *The Two Towers*, *The Return of the King*, the insufferable *Ballad of Tom Bombadil*, the interminable *Silmarillion* - which even *then* I knew was crap -, taking notes all the way, in order to keep track of the realms, the genealogies, the myths and legends of the *Rohiren* and the origins of the *Istari*. I made my own maps of *Mirkwood* and sketched endless pages of characters, cities, signs and wonders based on Tolkien's descriptions. I quizzed my sister's paramour on obscure details – was *Sauron* the *Necromancer*?...what was *Eru*, and how could he/it return *Gandalf* from death after his bust-up with the *Balrog*? – and, realising that he didn't have a bloody clue, saved the trickier questions for when my sister and her mates were around and he would be forced to bluff and bluster his little faux-hippy head off. I listened religiously to *Brian Sibley* and *Michael Bakewell's* twenty-six part 1981 BBC radio adaptation, by which time I'd read all I could of the prime *Tolkien* canon, and – and if this isn't a sign of a nascent fanboy – added scribbled notes to the margins, correcting discrepancies and contradictions in *Robert Foster's Complete Guide To Middle Earth*. I relished the layering of detail, the rhymes and ballads, the distinctive character of the peoples represented and – as I grew older – the way that different European folk-traditions, pantheons and mythologies had been incorporated in the narrative. Only when the law of diminishing returns kicked in with *Christopher Tolkien's* seemingly endless regurgitations of his father's unfinished or discarded *Middle-Earth* manuscripts did I lose interest, and move on to pastures new.

Oddly enough, years later, when helping administrate a 'Living History' drama programme in Stirling, I auditioned and cast a bright-eyed little chap – a friend of a friend – in a number of shows. He moved on to better things, of course. Name of *Billy Boyd* – better known to cinema-going audiences the world o'er as a certain *Fool-of-a-Took*.

I can honestly say that I gave a Hobbit his first job!

When *Peter Jackson's* film trilogy was announced, I was initially disheartened. We'd already encountered *Ralph Bakshi's* aborted 1978 animated adaptation, and I feared that contracting all that meticulous detail into a few short hours of big-screen spectacle would either be more crushingly dreary than an Elvish stand-up comedian, or it would all get just too glitzy. As things turned out, although there were more than a few major edits (no *Bombadil* – Yaaaaay!), and odd Arwen-related continuity tweaks, the essence of the story remained sound.

It is, in its simplest form, not an epic about Elves, Dwarves, Wizards and great powers and plots...it's a story about friendship and the sacrifices we are prepared to make for it. *Sam* – the *true* hero of the tale, as far as I'm concerned – *Frodo*, *Merry* and *Pippin* do what they do not because they crave glory or adventure, but because their homes and their *hearts* will suffer if they do not. Without them, the whole thing falls apart.

That, really, is what elevates J. R. R. Tolkien from so many other writers of fantasy: he enjoyed the layering of detail upon detail in fashioning his worlds of wonder, but he was a Hobbit at heart....just like the rest of us.

GET YOUR TIGHTS OUT

As a kid I loved historical dramas – BBC1's delightfully grim Sunday tea-time Dickens adaptations, particularly. Mind you, this was in the '70s, so perhaps I simply mistook the peculiar pantomime villains of these melodramas for members of the Thatcher Cabinet ("Booo! Hissss!"). Mind you, though I enjoyed History at school (the past was, as L. P. Hartley so rightly wrote 'another country', and it seemed infinitely preferable to the breeze-blocked wilderness of a modern Scottish New Town), I hardly touched on it at University.

It wasn't until I was about to graduate, in 1990 - and was sent an invitation to audition as an actor on the *Stirling GhostWalk* – a guided tour of infamous haunted sites within the Royal Burgh's historic Old Town - that I started...*ahem*...living in the past.

Fascinated by folklore, I started to look more closely at the history behind the myths and legends I recounted, night after night. I got my Equity card the following year as part of another historical troupe, the *Royal Stirling Players*, performing dramas related to local history, and started researching the parts I played - the likes of beardy woman-hating cleric, John Knox, and murderous loon, Lord Ruthven – and was soon scripting and performing *GhostWalks*, *Living History* dramas and themed *Murder Mysteries* and events throughout the country. Scotland's 'Heritage Industry' - 'Tourism In Tights', as an acquaintance, unmindful of unfortunate acronyms, insists on calling it - has been my bread and butter ever since.

It can be a frustrating profession. Local councils, and tourist associations want to trump their towns' associations with the Sacred Cows of Caledonian culture - Wallace, Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots and Robert Burns. Unfortunately most have endured a rose-

coloured lens-graft: Bruce *must* be brave and righteous, Mary the *very definition* of the tragic romantic, Rabbie a loveable rogue, and Wallace must...*must*...be as similar to a certain short-arsed expatriate Antipodean Anti-Semite as possible. Talk of the self-serving turncoats, airhead slappers, selfish philanderers and...um...Welshmen these characters *truly* were, is *rarely* welcome. Consequently, travelling around the country you will endure the same tiresome tales time and time again...



Men in Tights

I've never liked that approach. It kills interest in History deader than Disco. Serving up the *same old* sanitised, sentimental, semi-historic slop just because (as I've so often been told) '*it's what people expect*' is just plain lazy – particularly when there is so much spice lying around, untapped, in the cultural kitchen cupboard. I've always tried to tell audiences things they *don't* know – working on the principle that they'll *remember* the unexpected.

Pottering around Scotland you'll spy many a plaque bearing the legend '*Mary, Queen of Scots Slept Here*' line. She got about a bit, that girl. Punters in such locations will inevitably expect to hear of her labyrinthine love-life: her jealous husband, Darnley, ordering the stabbing of her secretary, Rizzio; his assassination with high explosives by her boyfriend, Bothwell; her abduction/marriage (depending on who is telling the story)...it makes you wonder where there was a bloody fuss about Charlie and Camilla.

Asked to write a script for performance at St Andrews Castle, years back, I groaned when I heard that Historic Scotland wanted something about Mary's romantic troubles. Dear Gods...*not again*. She had a very limited association with the town, anyway, and I thought I'd struggle to find a suitable hook on which to hang the required drama. I rooted around in the local archives – one of my favourite parts of the writing process, as you never know quite what you'll find. So it was, quite by accident, I stumbled on something curious – an account of the execution of a Frenchman – a poet and courtier, Pierre De Boscosal De Chastelard – in the Town Square. Odd, I thought, for a foreign national of rank to be topped so publicly.

Perky Pierre – a pretty boy, of the type our Mary famously had a fancy for – was found naked in her apartments. Oho! A secret lover? Everyone assumed so, it seems, at the time – Her Madge had a *reputation*, after all. I delved deeper, and found a satisfying twist to the tale.

Turns out he was a Huguenot spy who had infiltrated her Court and was trying to compromise her royal reputation – seeking revenge for his fellow French Protestants massacre by the Queen's Gallic cousins. The truth revealed, Mary – a prize pillock to the last – railed against demands that he be executed. Yes, it would *save her reputation*, but he was a *poet* – and only a *barbarian* would kill an *artist*. Her half-brother, James the Bastard (ironically, a rather nice chap), decided the wordsmith himself was in serious need of an edit...*and chopped his nut off*.

I've read his verse. It was fair criticism. You may find it on-line...but I wouldn't. Really.

Mary lived on to ruin her own reputation (she really didn't need help, there) – and the poet became little more than an obscure local footnote...which is where I found him.

To my mind Mary's concern that she would be judged more harshly as *an executor of poets* than as a *hussy* says as much about her self-image as ...say...a *Panorama* interview with a modern 'Queen of Hearts'. I used it as the hook for my script, *Poetic Justice*: the lynchpin of a blazing row between Mary and James, providing context for discussion of the facts and fancies surrounding *her* romantic life – and of *his* attempts as her '*spin-doctor*' to turn the scandal to her advantage. I gave the audience a *little* of what they '*expected*', but through characters and incidents they'd never heard of...and are more likely to remember.

That's the enduring delight of my scriptwriting work. I love finding the little hooks and links connecting historical fact and fancy – be it tracing the eddies of a ghost-story or myth through generations of Chinese Whispers, or chancing on a character, incident or account which makes me look at events in a new light. I firmly believe dusty archives can provide as accurate a mirror on our world as any newspaper, podcast or contemporary media. After all, the more things change...the more they stay the same.

WHERE'S WALLY?

It's an overcast summer morn: Monday the 24th of June, 1861.

Since dawn – by train, horse, hoof and heel – eighty thousand visitors have converged upon Stirling's King's Park – *doubling* the Royal Burgh's population for the day. There are forty pipe-bands; volunteers and veterans representing thirty regiments; the Incorporated Guilds; the Provost and Baillies of the Burgh; Masons and Oddfellows. Four hundred soldiers and one hundred and fifty constables line the two-mile train in as it marches toward the rocky promontory of the Abbey Craig. The pipers, strike up '*Scots Wha Hae*', and the crowd cheers and weeps as the battle-swords of Robert Bruce and the Black Douglas are held high, the flag – the *Union* flag, mind you, *not* the Saltire – is raised, and a twenty-one gun salute rings out from the distant ramparts of the ancient '*Key To The Kingdom*', Stirling Castle...

What's it all about?

Riot? Revolution? Lulu's first gig?

Nope.

All of this pomp was for...a *building site* - the laying of the foundation stone of a monument dedicated to a man largely uncelebrated (officially, anyway) since his death 556 years earlier. It would be *years* yet before those who marched and cheered and wept could climb the two hundred and forty six steps which lead to the summit of the edifice under construction.



The biggest Willie in Scotland

The brainchild of the Reverend Charles Rogers, it was funded *entirely* by public subscription. The richest and poorest in the land (and beyond) contributed...from the aristocratic history-geek Marquis of Bute to the Carbonari revolutionary nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi.

Fair enough: William Wallace *is* an appealing icon. The defender of the oppressed; unflinching in his willingness to sacrifice his all for sake of cause and country.

What's *not* to like?

Yet, for all the passion his name generates, we know practically *nothing* about him. He led the Scots to victory at Lanark and Stirling Bridge and was named Guardian of Scotland, he did some *very* nasty things in Newcastle, floundered at Falkirk, fled to Europe, failed to gather support there, was betrayed by the Sheriff of Dumbarton on his return...and was executed for Treason, after a 1305 show-trial.

That's about it.

He came from Riccarton, Renfrewshire, Dundee, Ayrshire or *possibly* Shropshire – depending on who is telling the tale. He might *even* be a Welshman - that's what his name *means*, after all – which could account for his palpable proficiency in hill fighting, and for the bloody great dragon - a beastie which occurs precisely *nowhere* in Scots mythology – said to have decorated his helmet. His first biography – '*The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campion Schir William Wallace*' – was written in verse by Blind Harry the Minstrel (who wasn't blind, called Harry or a minstrel – but *that's Showbiz!*) 172 years after Oor Wullie was hanged drawn and quartered...was *bollocks* from start to finish (Randall Wallace used it a lot when writing the equally testicular *Braveheart*).

Harry's was a *fan-fiction* – filling in the blanks, fleshing-out or re-fashioning a hero to make him more more valiant, more virtuous – cherry-picking only the *finest*, most *flattering* features. Think of the interminable bickering of Whovians over whether Paul McGann's Doctor being half-human *is* or *is not* canon – a notion violently rejected by those who think that a taint of humanity somehow lessens their hero. There's a lot of that with Wallace. I was once chased – literally – from one side of Stirling's Castle Rock to the other by a nasty Neanderthal Nat who took violent exception the merest suggestion that Wullie might...*just might*...be a Taff. Would that have diminished his deeds or doggedly determined reputation? No. Had the mouth-breather ever studied the subject? I doubt it. It was just *wrong*..he *HAD* to be Scottish. *So there!*

It's nothing *new*, of course. Go back three centuries from where we started.

In 1561 Edinburgh's Baillies prohibited performances of the Merchants' popular '*Robin Hood*' plays on Market Days - objecting to their glorifying the antics of an outlaw. The townsfolk took the ruling in their traditionally tolerant, law-abiding manner: they rioted for a fortnight, set fire to the docks and shot a Magistrate.

What's that? The citizens of *Caledonia's Capital* getting blustrous and bloody over a distinctively *English* hero? Intentionally or not, they were fashioning a form of fan-fiction - one with rather more local roots than might seem apparent.

Break it down. Hood was (traditionally) a landowner who opposed the usurping Prince John – just as Wallace defied King Edward; Robin fought for the true monarch, Richard – just as William defended John Balliol; each set his wits against an evil Sheriff – of Nottingham and Lanark, respectively; both took refuge in forests – Sherwood and Ettrick – consorting with outlaws and attacking Tax Collectors (Wallace supposedly skinned Edward's agent Sir Hugo de Cresingham, alive – fashioning a new sword-sheath from the villain's hide); each even sports a nifty green wardrobe– and a '*Marian*', '*Mirren*' or '*Murun*' in *Braveheart* crops up in most versions of both stories.

So *who* were the citizens celebrating?

Years back I wrote a slapstick skit, *Robin Who?*, featuring two troupes of Mediaeval minstrels touting for trade on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. One performed a piece about Robin, the other about Wallace. The casts clashed. The wrong hero ended up on each stage...with no change to the plot until the finale, when 'Wallace' - realising that if he stays where he is he won't get executed - decides he's happy being an Englishman.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that Wallace was Robin – merely that centuries of fannish embellishment and regional influence have helped fashion his meta-fiction in popular history. Ultimately our heroes are what we make of them. Gibson's Wallace is no more or less accurate than Bling Harry's, but for many seems more real. Truth actually *gets in the way of* the marvel of myth: we shape great heroes - our Robins, Wallaces...*Doctors* - as we *want* them to be. The idea – the symbol - is more vital than the reality.

In those terms the Rev. Rogers' little erection is a towering triumph of fan-fiction.

HARRY'S GAME

Henry Fielding (1707–1754) seriously pissed people off. A lot of people. Generally, though, they were the sort of people one *should* try to piss off. They say that you shouldn't judge a man by the standing of his friends, but by the quality of his enemies. In those terms, Hal was quite a lad.

He was a drunkard, a womaniser, a gambler, a brawler and a rattling roister-doister. Much like his most famous creation, the gadabout *Tom Jones*, in fact – and there's a lot of the author in that wayward and worthy rake. Like *Tom*, Henry was forced to flee to London and eke out a meagre living as a writer when his flirtation with a fulsome filly brought him to the attention of local magistrates. Like *Tom*, he had an eye (and one or two other things) for the ladies, but was *truly* devoted to *one* headstrong heart-throb, Charlotte Cradock – who became the inspiration for his hero's true love, *Sophia Weston*.

And, like his priapic protagonist, he was mercifully free of hypocrisy. He liked sex. He liked sex *a lot*, and, indeed, *a lot* of sex – and didn't believe in furtive fornications. Yet it was public marriage – with Mary, his dear Charlotte's pregnant maid, three years after his true-love's death - not private podgerings which earned him the ire of his peers.



An amiable troublemaker

John Ireland (after Hogarth)

I mean...these things just *weren't* done.

He was a dedicated trouble maker. His stage satires so incensed the corrupt government of Horace Walpole that the *Theatre Licensing Act* of 1737 was introduced to end his theatrical career (bringing down the curtain on the gloriously titled *The Vision of the Golden Rump*. Now, Hal's heroes were often faced by such villainous vagaries and, being the good storyteller that he was, he turned this horrendous happenstance to his favour....and became a barrister.

An odd choice of career, you might think, for a madcap luvvie gadabout: like Clive Anderson in reverse...but...y'know...*funny*. He went to the Bar within three years (most took twice that time). In these efforts he was joined by his blind half-brother, John - and the Fielding boys were *formidable*.

Even as a Justice of the Peace he couldn't resist taking the odd pop at pomposity - issuing a warrant for the arrest of the then Poet Laureate, Colly Cibber, a talentless toady who famously re-wrote Shakespeare's *King Lear*...with a *happy ending*, for

'Murder of the English language'. The moral and sexual hypocrisy of Samuel Richardson's wretched *Pamela* – the first modern English novel, published in 1740, which features a maid being abused and raped by her Master, whom she subsequently marries, thus 'restoring' her virtue (and his) – so incensed him that he immediately wrote a parody, *Shamela*, which he extended in 1742 as the glorious *History and Adventures of Joseph Andrews*. Here it is a virginal and virtuous male servant who is the object of attention of lascivious female gentry, including the grotesque *Lady Booby*.

It was a late night screening of Tony Richardson's 1977 film of this book, in the early '80s, which first turned me on to Harry's oeuvre.

Wow. This was literature? Really? It was sharp, socially conscious, brash, bawdy and bloody funny - like an indignant Dickens...*but with knob-gags*. Fielding was fascinated by the sham and hypocrisy of social convention - with seeming than with being. *Tom Jones's Reverend Thwackum* is a liar, an ingrate, a bully and a most *un-Christian* gentleman, and the author takes particular pleasure in mocking this faux-virtue. *Sophia's* family are quite willing to ignore her attempted rape at the hands of the loathsome fop, *Lord Fellamor*, because his advances would be seen as socially advantageous. High Society reeled in outrage that such things were being talked about, publicly...and everyone else roared with laughter, seeing their betters in their true colours. The poor and put-upon, were much more favourably featured. Unlike most of his fellow scribes he knew (normally because of his *own* fiscal folly) what it felt like to be hungry and hopeless.

1743's semi-biographical *History of the Life of the Late Mr Jonathan Wild the Great*, followed. Wild had been commissioned to catch criminals in the Capital – providing thousands for the gallows. Those who paid tribute to the '*Thief Taker*' were marked with a cross in his ledgers. Those who didn't, and earned a second cross next to their names – who were '*double-crossed*' – soon felt the hangman's handshake. Wild was long dead - hanged in 1725 - but the system he represented – perpetuating and encouraging injustice by only seeming to do something to solve the problem of crime - was still very much in evidence.

Problematic but popular, Henry soon took offices at Bow Street, as London's Chief Magistrate, with John – reputedly able to identify three-thousand criminals from the sound of their voices – as his assistant. He campaigned for reform of the judicial system, and - when that wasn't enough - formed the Bow Street Runners - the first professional police force. His *Police Gazette* kept the details and distinguishing features of hundreds of miscreants in circulation (providing the basis for his brother's later development of a criminal records department, when the '*Blind Beak*' succeeded him as Magistrate in 1754). He opposed public execution, though not capital punishment: he thought it right that rogues should hang, but that it trivialised the Law to turn their despatch into a public entertainment. Channel Four's '*City of Vice*' fictionalises the Fielding's' fight for Justice.

Not bad for a waster, eh?

He fashioned his heroes in his own image: flawed but earnest – rather than making them more virtuous and valiant than he himself could ever be. Crooks, pompous pricks, and hypocrites hated him, and he returned the favour...with wit (and the occasional custodial sentence). He made me laugh and think, and I think it would have been a good laugh to have quaffed a pint o' wine in some Cheapside dive with Tom, or Joseph...or Henry.

If there's higher praise..I don't know what it is.

A LONG TIME AGO, IN A NEW TOWN NOT-SO FAR AWAY

When I was ten I wanted to be a Jedi.

This, I imagine, was a great relief to my Mother - a tad troubled that my oft expressed desire to be Batman would require me to be orphaned, grow up as an emotional cripple, hang around with a succession of small boys in tights, and enjoy significant relationships only with 'bad girls' who my righteous drive for justice would compel me to beat up and bind on a regular basis.

Paging Dr Freud!

The Jedi thing was Richard Wilson's fault. Not the declamatory disbeliever of comedy fame, mind you - but a Chicken Pox spreading clot of a classmate. Off school and ailing, I sought solace from the telly. *Rumpole of the Bailey* having yielded to the cozified hell of *Farmhouse Kitchen*, I switched over to the BBC, and *Pebble Mill at One*...

Ooooooh...!



NOT a werewolf!

(c) 1976 Twentieth Century Fox

A film clip: a cowboy and a werewolf were shooting-it-out with big white robots in a parking-lot. Now, show me a ten year old boy for whom that combo *isn't* cooler than liquid nitro and I'll show you...well...a home-educated nerd called Quintin, probably. A beardie chap – George, I think his name was – showed the avuncular host, a picture of an old beardie holding a fiery sword. A '*Light-Sabre*', he called it! *His* name was Alec, it seems, and he was a '*Jedi-Knight*'. Had my geek-testicles descended, I might have had my first fan-gasm, there and then. I spent what remained of my convalescence drawing variations of the white robots, the werewolf and the cowboy (where did he keep his horse?). I drew a castle for the Jedi Knight (Did *he* have a horse? A Knight *should* have a horse, *surely!*), and decided that I had found my vocation in life. Returning to school I was dumbfounded to discover that no-one else knew what I was talking about (an increasingly common happenstance, the older I get).

Shopping with my Mum, I spied one of those flaming sword thingies on the cover of a book – *Star Wars – From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker*, by George Lucas. George? I remembered him. Could this be what I saw on *Pebble Mill*? Maybe - the cover proclaimed that it was '*THE GREATEST FILM OF THE CENTURY*', after all. I flicked through the '*16 PAGES OF FABULOUS COLOUR*' and – sure enough – there was hairy old Jedi-Alec...though now his name was Ben. Or Obi Wan. Both, possibly. They were *odd* these Jedi – but they had funky fiery swords, so I was inclined to *forgive* them their confusing nomenclature. My ebullient expressions of geeky enthusiasm signalling the impending public embarrassment of spontaneously combustion midst the pick-n-mix, my Mum bought me the book – a pricey 95p. Mindful of the expense, I read it in one sitting.

I was slightly ticked off, to be honest, that *Chewbacca* wasn't a werewolf (though I still suspected waistcoat wearing chum was a cowboy), and that the white robots weren't actually mechanical, but I was still – like the *Death Star* – completely blown away. I was surer than ever that I wanted to be a Jedi ("*This is not the homework you're looking for...!*").

I clipped articles and interviews, box-covers and bubble-gum cards. These I reverently stored - in what I discovered, recently, was a bog-standard A4 box-file. I coveted action figures, games, models, soaps and maths sets (I hated maths with the same fiery passion I now reserve for Young Conservatives, but Darth Vader's pixellated puss on my protractor made it funky!). I purloined the Marvel Special Edition comic adaptation from my sister's fiancée. I had John Williams's soundtrack LP, too. No actual *record player*, mind you...*but never mind* – paltry technical limitations could not confound the first flowering of my faddish-fandom.

I still hadn't seen the *film* yet, of course. When I did – a good three months after '*first contact*', I was peeved that Luke's pal *Biggs Darklighter* was pretty much chopped – he was in the book and comic, after all (the continuity quibbling Fanboy gene was evident even then). I loved it, though. It was bigger and bolder than anything I'd ever seen: my enduring memory of that first screening is the thrill of the Imperial Destroyer consuming

the screen as it dwarfs Princess Leia's ship. Wow! I loved it more than ever when Marvel UK started their *Star Wars Weekly*, and the adventures of *Luke*, *Leia*, *Han*, etc., continued – coming into my home every Thursday for several years, with news of the cast, the crew and of wonders still to come.

I even got myself a Light-Sabre – but it was inflatable and only shone (in the dark) courtesy of three AAA batteries. And that, I fear, is where I lost faith in my Jedi masters. How could I *Trust The Force* when a slow leak was all that was needed to thwart my galactic good intentions?

Fandom, friends, is a fickle thing. By the time *The Empire Strikes Back* was released, I was still a fan, but my zealotry had passed. The new film contradicted much of what I'd read in Archie Goodwin's Marvel strips – and they, for me, were Jedi-Gospel. I was also getting pissed off with whiny *Luke*, and aware of just how crap Mark Hamill was as an actor. Anyway, my fannish-fancy had flitted to another franchise – with the arrival of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*...but that, as they say, is another story.

Star Wars provided my first real experience of fannish zeal, something I don't think I ever recaptured for another franchise, and I still – to be honest – don't understand the overwhelming thrall it continues to command in so many devotees. For my own part, I was simply overwhelmed by the fun of the first film, and felt let down by Lucas's constant revisions and attempts to explain his creation. That said – ten years on, now, from the disappointing *Phantom Menace* – I do feel a little nostalgic for the passion my formative fandom stirred in me.

But that was a *long time ago*, in a galaxy *far, far away*...

HOLMES IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Each Wednesday evening, when I was eight, I collected my comics from a newsagent in the centre of town. I was often accompanied on these after-school jaunts by a lumpen wrist-radio, received as a birthday gift, which I insisted on wearing everywhere.

One such night – in December of 1974, it would have been – I hurried to the shops, expectant of episodic delights. They hadn't come. Feet shuffling - fretfully fiddling with the tuning dial as I went - I sulkily sloped off, homeward.

Nowadays one might wonder at my being allowed to wander so, but these were the '70s - the age before 'stranger-danger', and I was a belligerent brat. Nothing could keep me from my comic-fix.

As it happened, I was to have an encounter that night - one which would affect me to this very day...

A light mist hung in the early evening air, the damp clinging to me as I trod the lonely streets – quieter, I noticed, than usual. My fleeting footfalls only accompaniment on the

fog shrouded pavements was the hiss and whine of the radio, rarely lingering for even a fraction of a second on any station. I left the bitter, breathy swirls of light beneath the streetlamps, and moved into the verdant gloom of the woodland which would lead me home. Not far, now. My pace quickened as I moved ever deeper into the darkness...

I stopped, dead in my tracks, a fearful growl cutting through the chill air

"Which of you is Holmes?" it grunted.

Eh?

"My name, sir" said another *"you have the advantage of me. Pray take a seat."*

"I will do nothing of the kind." The first voice croaked *"My stepdaughter has been here. What has she been saying to you?"*

"That it is a little cold for the time of the year..."

A scream of pure rage startled birds in the surrounding trees: *"What has she been saying to you?"*

"...but I have heard that the crocuses promise well!" chirped confident, measured tones.

The first voice was raging, now. *"I know you, you...scoundrel! You are Holmes, the meddler. Holmes, the busybody! Holmes, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office!...Don't you dare to meddle in my affairs!"*

Aaah! *Holmes. Sherlock Holmes.*



The Great Detective (and friend)

Sidney Paget

I knew the name. Of course I did. *Who didn't?* Holmes was one of those rare, universally ubiquitous characters who one always seemed to have been aware of. Yet, though I knew he was a detective, wore an weird hat and smoked a pipe (like Mr Gold, the Headmaster - though he was too preoccupied with the perils of playground littering to frustrate more fearsome felons) – he wasn't that familiar. Until that night.

I had chanced upon a reading of Arthur Conan Doyle's chilling *The Speckled Band* – still, three and a half decades later, my favourite short story. My pace slowed. I loitered

longer on the path, rapt – hoping the signal (and batteries) wouldn't fail me. I shivered outside my block of flats as the deadly swamp-adder slunk and slithered down the bell-rope ...breathless as the foul creature despatched the dastardly Doctor. The cold, dark night seemed so much *part* of the story.

Mind you, my Mum was bloody furious. She probably had a point, but I felt safe with Sherlock: he stood up to a bully – *and first impressions count*.

Mum didn't approve: manic-depressive, antisocial drug addicts of ambiguous sexuality were not a particularly good influence. Mind you, my other heroes du jour – Batman and that cosmic-hobo in the blue box probably weren't much better. At least Sherlock had a job.

I soon worked my way through all of Doyle's stories – enjoying the adventure and escapism of the tales. I relished rare repeats of Douglas Wilmer's BBC adventures, and warmly greeted Mr Rathbone's annual Friday night appearances - Rondo Hatton's *Hoxton Creeper* still chills my blood, making 1944's *Pearl of Death* being a personal favourite. John Neville's Holmes in the 1965 *A Study In Terror* awakened my interest in the mysteries surrounding *Jack the Ripper*, and I revelled in John Moffat's radio-turn as the Great Detective in BBC Radio's gothic *Sherlock Holmes versus Dracula*, in 1981. Glued to my tatty old battery-powered tranny during the Christmas power-cut that year, or watching the battered black-and-white portable in my bedroom, I was treading those misty streets, again and again...

His adventures ranged from the exotic - combating the Loch Ness monster in Billy Wilder's affectionate *Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* in 1970, his own psyche in 1976's *The Seven Percent Solution* and *Jack the Ripper* (again), in the 1979 classic *Murder By Decree* – to the canonical ITV interpretations of the following decade. Though tone and temperament of Messrs Stephens, Williamson, Plummer and Brett differed tremendously, Holmes was always the dependable hero I knew. I discovered, too, the radio incarnations - John Guilgud (with Orson Welles as Moriarty), Clive Merrison and, of course, Mr Rathbone once more.

I ignored Peter Cook, wanted to wound Woodward and hurt Heston, swore I'd have no Moore of Roger, railed against Roxburgh and was utterly indifferent to Everett.

Plummer might best capture the Detective's indignation, Stephens his theatricality and Cushing his clinical detachment...but it was Jeremy Brett brought the vibrancy and vulnerability of the detective together. The thing is, he didn't do anything significantly different to what had gone before, he just seemed to understand Holmes more – that his dark moods and self-destructive character were the price he paid for possessing that great brain. Though, of course, he and Sherlock were cut from the same clay, in that regard. His insight let him see how the pieces of the puzzle fitted together, and his solution was flawless.

We *know* Holmes. He's not just familiar – he's *always* been with us, and will outlive every one of us. He has achieved an odd kind of *meta-reality* – recreated more frequently on film, TV, radio, in books, comics and games than any other literary – or historic – figure, only floundering when divorced from Doyle's template. That bodes ill for Robert Downey Jr's impending outing – an interpretation so *widely divorced* from the Holmes we know as to make it offensive to admirers and utterly irrelevant to those who are making his *first* acquaintance.

And, as I learned, first *impressions count*.

GEEK ALERT!

I'm one of the Geek Police. A supervisor on the *SFX Magazine* web-Forum of scientifictional fan-fevers and general genre-based badinage.

As I've said in previous columns, I have my little peccadilloes: my favoured, fads, fancies and enthusiasms. I enjoy more than my fair share of bufferies – for film, comics and literature, particularly. I can enthuse with the best of them over folklore and history, and render complete strangers *sans pants* with all manner of meaningless trivia. Formative fumbblings in the cultural undercarriage of fantastical fictions aside, though, I'm not a huge science-fiction or fantasy fan.

To be honest, I just don't properly *understand* geekdom. Parts of it, anyway.

Don't get me wrong, I would not for a moment *deny* that I am a Geek – when you need to build and insulate a shed and shelve an entire wall of your bedroom to accommodate your comic and graphic novel collection, and spend an annual average of £200 simply on the safe *storage* - bagging and boarding - of those four-colour fancies, there's no escaping the fact you are a fanboy. I know the names of Spock's parents, what to say in order to pacify any pissed-off eight-foot-tall silver robot encountered in Presidents' Park, Buffy's middle name, the specific Classical influences in John Williams' *Star Wars* scores, and why Mylar Bags are *A Good Thing*. I can rant, at length on why Rob Liefeld is crap, Chuck Austen is a hack and Uwe Boll the cinematic Anti-Christ. I '*frak*'. I '*drokk*'. And I would never say '*Belgium*' in the presence of persons of a sensitive disposition or small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri.

These are not details or concerns which matter a jot to the average Joe or Josephine. Nor should they. They are part and parcel of the epistemology of the enthusiast within the sub-culture of the sci-fi Geek: specialist knowledge, subjectively (and arguably) essential to the understanding of a fad-of-choice.

My Geek-knowledge on a whole host of sci-fi subjects is notional or non-existent. This is, sadly, something certain devotees are ever-eager to point out when I'm Modding. How dare I presume to proffer comment or chastisement in a discussion as to whether - say - '*Doctor*' Paul McGann's half-humanity is (or is not) canon when I haven't read

every book and heard every audio-drama featuring his incarnation of everyone's favourite cosmic beatnik? How can I judge whether calling an admirer of Frank Miller's *All-Star Batman and Robin* a '*retarded motherfucker*' is justified unless I, too, have intravenously ingested a distillation of *every single word* the Great Man has committed to print over the past three decades? The culturally corrosive bile certain subjects seem to engender in a minority of die-hard devotees is quite astonishing, and it occasionally it feels as though some kind of cultural height-restriction should be enforced - only contributors who achieved a certain degree of anal-retention need participate in particular discussions. The argument that you are not a '*real*' fan unless you have read, heard, seen or experienced a particular manifestation of multi-media fandom is, infuriatingly, not uncommon. You would not believe the bizarre comments garnered by expressing sentiments to the contrary. I've actually had death threats. No, *really*. This exclusionist attitude is the worst part of Geekdom - all Geekdoms - in that it enforces a weird pop-cultural sectarianism.



Why? Just...why???

I don't understand the kind of geekdom which leads people to attend conventions garishly garbed as their favourite comic-book characters - and I say this as an actor who owns and wears wardrobes full of equally outlandish period outfits. I have never, since I was ten, *wanted* to own a Light-Sabre, learn Klingon or dance the Batusi - yet possess various swords, enjoy Middle-English verse, and do a mean Horses' Brawl (a 15th-century folk dance, in case you're wondering). I don't think there's anything *wrong* or inherently odd in *wanting* to do any of these things - I genuinely admire the craft and skill of many Cosplay participants, and the effort expended in becoming conversant in the Warrior's Tongue. I just don't '*get*' it.

Mind you, most people wouldn't 'get' my idiosyncratic interest in the alchemical Dr Dee. In one recent forum discussion on the subject of Magic in literature I was a little surprised that I could name, off hand, half-a-dozen favourite 16th century occultists. Not just an awareness that they existed: I have favourites. I'm fascinated by the minutiae of the 1811 *Ratcliffe Highway Murders*, and any number of curious crimes and gobbets of cultural marginalia. *Hell*, I spent years of my life studying deontological and teleological concepts of Evil in the plays of Shakespeare: a practice of no sodding use to 99.9% of the population, but which entertained me, immensely. Compared to matters of historical homicide or the ethos of New Historicism a desire to translate or perform *Hamlet* in Klingon is a comparatively constructive pastime. Are my fads any more 'normal' or comprehensible to a non-geek than a detailed understanding of the Federation's Prime Directive because half of them are excused by academic interest? Not a *frakking* chance. Are those 'respectable' or 'serious' interests any more accessible to outsiders, unaware of their special terminologies or practices? *Drok me*, no!

It may sound like I'm criticising Geekdom, here – or mocking the genre-afflicted. Not so. As noted earlier, I can appreciate the appeal of the odd or the obsessive. In life – and in Moderation – I am constantly intrigued by new ideas, new information and new experiences which my more subjectively geeky compatriots present to me, or which I chance upon while patrolling threads in search of expletives. My life is much richer for that. Hopefully some of the oddities I have imparted have, likewise, been of interest to others. For every anally-retentive zealot there are a hundred enthusiasts, eager to do nothing more than share their interests...in life *and* in Geekdom.

GODS AND MONSTERS Part 1

Existential Crisis

Towards the end of Grant Morrison's late '80s revival of DC Comics' *Animal Man*, something very nasty happens to the titular hero. Well, to be fair, the nastiest part of the whole sorry business happens to his wife and kids – gunned down in their kitchen by an assassin intent on deterring our hero, Buddy Baker, from further eco-activism. Buddy suffers a breakdown, and, on the verge of suicide, teams up with the mercenary Mirror Master to hunt down those responsible. Hair shorn, garbed in black leather, and grim of countenance, he murders each in turn...

A far cry from the happy-go-lucky '60s hero created by Dave Wood and Carmine Infantino – able to borrow animals' abilities through accidental exposure to radiation from an exploding extraterrestrial craft (*obviously*). Aside from initial appearances in *Strange Adventures*, a cameo in a mid '70s *Wonder Woman* strip and a 'Whatever Happened To...' back-up in *DC Comics Presents*, in the early '80s (where I first encountered him), his highest-profile appearances were with the '*Forgotten Heroes*' – a loose association of DC Z-listers.

It was a far cry, too, from the pacifist, laid back, socially conscience stricken hero Morrison had established over the previous two years: Buddy was a tree-hugger, fer Chrissakes.

So, what was going on? Gods and Monsters, gentle friends. Gods and Monsters.

Welcome to the 1980s – a period where editors seemed convinced that being grim, gritty and decking the halls with as many varieties of viscera as one could happily shake a scythe at was the way to ensure a new comic's marketability. Frank Miller's **Batman** often gets the blame for this: providing a template for many a revisionist reaming of a classic – or *forgotten* – character. A family trauma emotionally churned a cheery chap or chappette into a sneeringly studded, leather-clad avatar of vengeance. A surfeit of straps and pouches that even Rob Leifield would consider excessive usually adorned these atavistic anti-heroes.



Animal Man's Meta-tastic Extentential Crisis

(c) 1986 DC Comics

Consensus was that our heroes *had* to suffer. A lot. Mental anguish was the trope du jour. Physical, too. *Robin* was murdered and *Batgirl* crippled. Batman's back was broken. *Superman* died. *Aquaman* lost a hand and (briefly) his kingdom. 'Comics' covers proudly proclaimed 'Aren't Just For Kids', and to prove this punches, guts and *Comic Code* accreditations were soon flying out the window. This was the era that spawned the 'For Mature Readers' tag which so incensed Alan Moore – who thought that 'Warning: Contains Tits and Innards' was often a more apposite appellation.

The bearded one, of course, was no stranger to the reinvention of Silver Age stalwarts. He transformed *Swamp Thing* into a genuinely horrific – and poetic – meditation on humanity by abandoning the premise that the title character was attempting to *regain* his human form and perspective. Fair enough. His constant failure to achieve that end frustrated readers and killed interest in the book, and success would rob the title of purpose. He did something new, but which remained firmly in continuity.

Earlier, with *Marvelman* (latterly *Miracleman*, thanks to copyright gripes with Marvel Comics...amongst others), he had more radically revived one of British publishing's few

'50s superheroes – Mick Anglo's astonishingly unsubtle *Captain Marvel* knock-off. Moore was criticised for degrading an innocent heroic ideal. Not so. Yes, the title contains - in *Kid Marvelman's* decimation of London - some of the most genuinely unsettling images ever committed to the comic-book page, but the hero transcended the heroic ideal - noble in reason, infinite in faculty, express and admirable in form and moving...in action, how like an Angel...in apprehension, how like a God. *Übermensch*. He would end war, save the planet – and ourselves, from ourselves. Whether he was right to do so, or we could accept such authority (however benign) is another matter. Neil Gaiman – himself no stranger to retro-revisionism, with *Sandman* and *Black Orchid* – continued the trend during his run on the title. These titles are all about personal responsibility for what is to come, and what has gone before....for heroes and creators.

Gods and Monsters.

In issue #5 of *Animal Man* a cartoonish Coyote from a 'Loony Tunes' inspired alternative-reality crops up in the DC Universe, trying to entreat his Creator into curbing the senseless cycle of brutality which afflicts his ilk. Even within the garish world of superheroics his violent and untimely end is uncomfortable to read.

Buddy, too, embarks on such a quest, to make sense of the destructive spiral of his reality. He finds himself in 'Comic Book Limbo', greeted by *Merryman* of the *Inferior Five* – “*You know, I didn't think you'd be back here quite so soon!*” This is the realm where 'Forgotten Heroes' await reinvention or revival. *Captain Carrot* hops by, the *Red Bee* bemoans that his buzzing buddies may have died of the cold, and *Dumb Bunny* balks at the suggestion that she “*could be used to make a feminist statement*” (“*Yeeukk!!*”). “*It's the animals I feel sorry for*” says *Merryman*. “*They'll never get out of here. Times have changed...Let's face it, Who cares about the Space Canine Patrol Agents in this day and age?*” Who, indeed.

Exasperated and intrigued, our hero is persuaded to accompany the ailing typewriter-monkey (“*I think this must be his final script!*”) to the City of Formation in search of answers. There he meet “*the evil mastermind behind the scenes...the wicked puppeteer who pulls the strings and makes you dance...who writes your wrongs*”.

Grant Morrison.

Even for those familiar with the deconstructive riff recurring in many of Mozzer's series – *The Invisibles*, *The Filth*, *Doom Patrol* and *Final Crisis* – the confidence and audacity of what follows remains astonishing. Grant explains how his own animal-rights activism and vegetarianism informed his writing, warning the horrified veggie that new creators “*might...go for shock by turning you into a meat-eater*” (Peter Milligan, who inherited the comic, did just that), and how his interest in Rupert Sheldrake's theories of *Morphic Resonance* influenced his approach to the character.

His Animal Man is a product of personal interests, contemporary influences and...yes...comic book trends. “*We'll stop at nothing, you see. All the suffering and the*

death and the pain in your world is entertainment for us.” The writer explains. “We thought that by making your world more violent we would make it more ‘realistic’. More ‘adult’. God help us if that’s what it means.”

A beat. *“Maybe for once we could try to be kind. Go home, Buddy...forget we ever met!”*

Buddy awakes from a ‘terrible dream’ - *“Are you joking? That cop-out went out with the Ark.”* - to find his family safe. He weeps. In a Glasgow flat fingers flash over a keyboard –

Close-up on Buddy’s face. He’s smiling and doesn’t know why, but tears start in his eyes...

Nothing’s wrong at all...

Nothing’s wrong...

Nothing’s wrong...

Nothing.

“Am I real or what?” the exasperated hero demanded, earlier in their exchange. “Of course you are...” Mr M responds. “...You existed long before I wrote you and, if you’re lucky, you’ll still be young when I’m old or dead!” Perhaps Buddy going dark was, as Morrison’s comic-incarnation claimed, a cruel device to lend his hero’s world more visceral verisimilitude. I like to think, though, that it was as much a comment on how tired a trope ‘grim-‘n’gritty’ had *already* become, in the late ‘80s. But in the four colour world what’s done can be undone. We just have to wait for the right Creator. *“Someone else creates you to be perfect and innocent and then I step in and spoil everything. It’s a little bit Satanic, I suppose.”*

Gods and monsters, folks. It’s what the story’s always been about.

GODS AND MONSTERS Part 2

Old Heroes Never Die...

In my last column, I quoted an exchange between long-suffering continuity conundrum, Buddy Baker, Animal Man, and the architect of his four-colour comic-book woes, writer Grant Morrison.

“Am I real or what?” the rattled retro do-gooder railed, confronted by the revelation that his every word, deed, thought, motive or mishap – however majestic, moribund or mundane – were the work of his wayward Weegee scribe. “Of course you are...” the master of his misfortunes replies “...You existed long before I wrote you and, if you’re lucky, you’ll still be young when I’m old or dead!”

True.

The romantic aspiration of many pulp fictions seems to be, as put by Nick Romano in Willard Motley’s 1947 tale *‘Knock On Every Door’*, to *“Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse!”*. Yet we’re also told that *‘Old heroes never die’*, though in some

cases we might be justified in hoping that they would – youthful memories of the derring-doings of the brave men of the *United Network Command for Law Enforcement* being greatly diminished by the vague suspicion that the alarmingly solid-looking quiffs adorning the hoary heads of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were not their own as they waddled their way through 1983's terrible *Return of the Man From UNCLE*. And childhood devotions to Jim Kirk's Sixties self were seriously shunted by the sight of his bewigged being blustering through the Eighties and Nineties in the later *Trek* outings. I don't think I'd be the only person depressed, decades from now, by the almost inevitable prospect of a en-dentured *Angel* or septuagenarian *Spike* returning to dally one last time with a decrepit *Darla*. These characters, are – and should be – locked in our memories as youthful, vital, idealised heroic avatars. Morrison describes *Animal Man*, in response to the bemused hero's query "What am I?", as "A generic comic book hero with blond hair and good teeth. One of hundreds."...and those kind of heroes *don't* age well. Old *Indiana Jones* wasn't at his best, after all, and do you really want to see a menopausal *Marvel Girl*?

There are characters, though, who escape that bind – usually heroes whose mythologies and continuities are so well defined that they are essentially ageless, or that their age is essentially irrelevant, and who can adapt to all manner of curious reinventions, interpretations. These are characters whose actions we feel we can predict, whose responses and attitudes we feel we know almost as well as our own. Often this is simply a consequence of familiarity – *Superman* has been every inch the ever-altruistic All-American Messiah for seventy years, now, without much significant revision (none that sticks, anyway). Sometimes personalities and key-characteristics are embedded by creators. 2005's *Constantine* movie may or may not have worked as a stand-alone horror-flick, but fans of *DC/Vertigo*'s Master of Bad-Luck Magic - from *Hellblazer*, *Books of Magic*, *Swamp Thing*, *Sandman* and a host of other titles - saw precious little of the trademark cheek and chutzpah of their anti-hero. Keanu just wasn't any form of *John Constantine* they recognised – a character who had verged between grim and gritty, distraught and devious under the creative control of wildly different and distinctive creators...Delano, Milligan, Ennis, Ellis, Morrison, Carey, Mina...always retaining core characteristics which made him identifiably the *Constantine* created by Alan Moore in *Swamp Thing* #35, back in 1985.

James Bond, *Don Quixote*, *Robin Hood*: despite the often patently ludicrous nature of their adventures, engender the illusion of an odd perceived reality – meta-history, if you will - and woe betide writers or directors who play too fast and loose with their precious cargo. *Santa*, too, falls into this group – and, believe me, your average five-year-old could out-do the most seasoned and anally-retentive Trekkie or Whovian in rooting out errors in character-continuity. Then, of course, there's the most frequently featured fictional multi-media presence in history – *Sherlock Holmes*.

We've had old Holmeses, young Holmeses, cheery, chummy and truculent Holmeses, gay, grumblesome and morose Holmeses. All of these elements appear, on occasion, in

Conan Doyle's creation – which make him, for all his outlandish, quixotic genius, recognisably human. Recognisably *real*.

A while back, when Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law were cast as *Holmes* and *Watson*, there much griping that the actors (well, one actor and Jude Law) were too young to play these iconic characters. Being a Holmes 'homie', well schooled in Sherlockian minutiae, I shared the fanboys' disdain for such arguments. I was slightly alarmed, checking the Internet Movie Database for other canonical characters, by how much of that mythological detail came flooding to the surface (and, before anyone asks, yes – I *do* find it mildly alarming that I know this shit).



Meta-history in action. Pilgrims visit sites associated with fictional characters

The second *Mrs Watson*, *Mary Morstan*, was listed amongst the characters (played by Kelly Reilly). Appearing first in *The Sign of Four*, which is set in September of 1888, she dies during the period of Holmes' presumed death, between *The Final Problem* and *The Empty House*. *The Final Problem* is set around 1891 (roughly dated - it being stated as having being *nearly* four years after his feigned demise at the Reichenbach Falls when he appears again in London, in Autumn 1894). If the presence of *Morstan* is *in canon*, then the new film takes place between 1888 and 1891.

Holmes was born in 1854, *Watson* in 1852 - meaning that *Holmes* should be between 34-37 and *Watson* between 36-39 (if *Mary* hasn't married the good Doctor yet, then they'd be 34 and 36 - as the *Watsons* wed directly after the events of *The Sign of Four*, in '88. Robert Downey Jr is 44, meaning that - strictly speaking - he's anything up to a decade older than the canonical Holmes (and only three years younger, incidentally, than the eternal cinematically iconic Basil Rathbone when he first took on the role). Law, at 37, is exactly the right age for the role.

The point is, the details of these characters' 'lives' are familiar to fans. We know *Holmes*' quirks and character faults. We know the layout of his living-room, his preferred pipe-tobacco (amongst other things), how dust is 'an essential part' of his filing system, when he dropped out of University, and why. But we don't know everything. We can't.

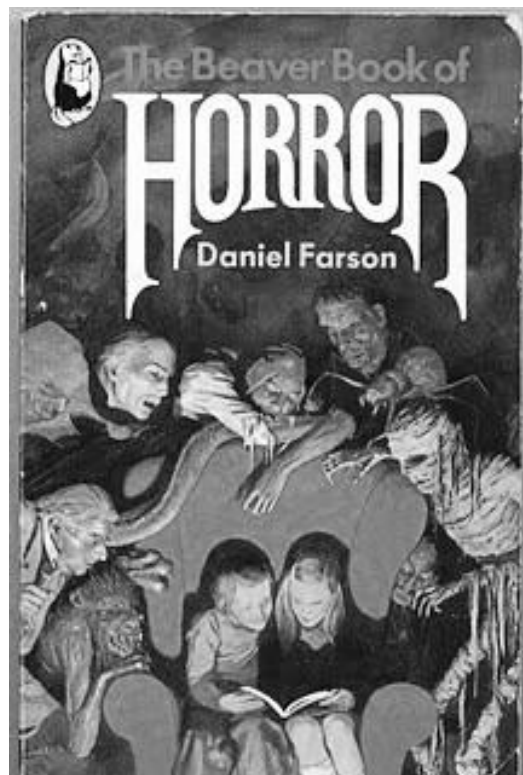
There's always little details he holds back from *Watson* – and from *us* – and that (like the cool kid in the playground of our youth) keeps us interested. There's always more to learn...or re-interpret. With the new Guy Ritchie movie I'm less annoyed by the slapstick or the slovenly, louche interpretation of *Holmes* than by the 'reinterpretation' of the cool, collected, cerebral *Irene Adler* as a sassy showgirl, snogging Sherlock to get the better of him. No. Oh fuck me, no. That isn't a 'reinterpretation', it's a complete reinvention – utterly changing the character-dynamic. If Downey responds in the way he does to Rachel MacAdam take on '*The Woman*', in the trailer, then they are just *NOT Holmes and Adler*.

For fans – protective of our favoured fictional friends – that spoils the 'reality' of recognition far more than a paunch, a syrup of a bucket of Grecian 2000 ever could.

SECRET ORIGINS

They say that the experiences and influences of youth are what shapes our tastes and talents. If so, then the recent rediscovery of a once favourite – and, until lately, long forgotten - childhood book may have revealed what made your unfriendly neighbourhood Hangman the merrily morbid bundle of joy you know so well.

It wasn't a book I had thought of – not consciously, anyway – for more than thirty years. I certainly wouldn't have dreamed of ascribing much of my professional and recreational interest to it. And yet...



Where it all began. Apparently

The slender tome in question was *The Beaver Book of Horror* by Daniel Farson. published in 1977. Picking this out of a pile of old books I was planning on passing on to the kids of friends, it was Farson's name which caught my eye. A fascinating man, was Dan Farson – a talented photographer, political journalist, and an influential, innovative broadcaster whose early TV shows *People in Trouble* and *Out Of Step* dealt objectively and compassionately with issues of homosexuality, transvestism, mixed-marriage and what would now be referred to as 'alternative lifestyles'. His 1957 show on Nudism caused an uproar, featuring – actually quite unsensationally - the first naked flesh on television. This was an unheard of approach to documentary in the cozified confines of '50s British broadcasting. He was a passionate commentator on Public Schools and other institutions of the British Establishment, youth culture, arts and scientist. He was the authorised biographer of the artist Francis Bacon, and Derek Jarman's *biographical study of the artist, Love Is The Devil* (1998), is posthumously dedicated to Farson – as well as a high-profile interviewer of popular singers, actors and celebrities.

As Morrissey would no doubt declaim...*Oh fickle fame!* Considering just quite how ubiquitous – and *popular* – Farson was in the '50s, '60s and '70s, it's astonishing that he is so little remembered, today: it's difficult to imagine a contemporary broadcaster (save, perhaps, for the sainted Stephen Fry) who so easily adapted to highbrow commentary and pop-culture chat.

I recognised his name, chiefly, though, because of his researches into an enduring interest of mine, the 1888 *Jack the Ripper* investigation. He was also Great-Nephew of *Dracula* scribe, Bram Stoker – (of whom he penned the biography *The Man Who Wrote Dracula* (1975) - which perhaps explains his only foray into the world of the supernatural...*The Beaver Book of Horror*.

Now, I'd be a liar if I claimed that I was aware of Farson's cultural pedigree back in the Autumn of '77, when I picked this up (60p!!!) in my local newsagent. I was a precocious brat, but was principally attracted by the awesome assemblage of cool ghouls in the superb cover illustration by Alan Lee - now better known as principal concept artist on Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies. By then – a Summertime insomniac, even at that tender age – I had started watching BBC2's Saturday night double-bills of classic horrors. I loved the stylish silliness of James Whale's 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein*, Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People*, 1942, and the Universal horrors - and the Technicolour delights of Valerie Leon's capacious cleavage, featured so prominently in 1971's *Blood From The Mummy's Tomb*, were quickly becoming apparent to me. Farson's book appealed to me like so many others, simply because it looked a little bit *ooooohhhhhhhhhhh!* My tastes were a tad indiscriminate, back then.

So why have I come to the conclusion that this is an important core-text in the shaping of all things Hangmanny? Chiefly because every single section has some enduring connection with my current interests or occupations.

I research and perform Ghost-Walks, so 'Of Ghosts and Ghouls' has an obvious resonance. 'Vampires' touches upon the origins and incidences of my all-time fave-from-the-grave monster-of-choice. 'Horror Stories' touches upon classics such as Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as one might expect – but it almost certainly introduced me to Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sheridan LeFanu's beautiful *Carmilla* and the tales of Poe, Ambrose Bierce and M.R. James, which have remained firm favourites to the present day. 'Horror on Stage and Screen' put names and personalities to the frightful faces of Lugosi, Karloff and Lee- so familiar from late-night weekend box-watching. 'Almost Human' introduced me to the myths of *Black Shuck*, the *Nuckelavee* and the *Lampton Worm*, and the sad tale of Elephant-Man John Merrick, and 'Your Guide To Horror' provided a ghoulish gazetteer of sinister sites – from Haiti to Highgate Cemetery – fuelling my nascent interest in Fortean. Finally, with 'Real Horrors', I had my first (albeit *mercifully* brief) encounters with the historical *Vlad Tepes*, *Gilles De Rais*, *Sawney Bean*, the Scottish Cannibal (don't knock it...in some parts of Scotland cannibalism is a healthy alternative to a Deep-Fried Mars Bar!) and...*Jack the Ripper*.

It's *not* a great book. It's, at best, something of a hotch-potch of random details, facts, figures and characters. It is entertaining, though, and certainly served as a spring-board into my enthusiasms for ghosts and story-telling, mythology, Fortean studies and True Crime. I've written and performed pieces on Ghosts, Vampires, the Horror of Glamis - freezing my arse off at 3am on a January morn while a slightly stoned *Sightings* producer tries to find the right angle to shoot my cod-piece flapping in the early morning breeze...though that's a tale for another day- , *Sawney Bean* and all manner of subjects first encountered within those pages. Most significantly, Farson introduced me to Poe, James and Bierce...refining my tastes in terror. *The Beaver Book of Horror* is the first instance I can find where all of those odd, ghoulish geekisms coalesce...which makes it, perhaps, all the more surprising that I had completely forgotten about it for thirty years.

Or perhaps not.

Farson is all but forgotten, today, yet he changed the face of popular factual broadcasting. His influence continues – even if today's young 'cutting-edge' film-makers are unaware that they are walking around in his oh-so-daring shoes. His *Jack the Ripper* wasn't the best, most astute or most accurate book on the subject – I personally disagree with most of his conclusions in the case - but it was one of the very *first* to capture the popular imagination and provoke serious research. Perhaps, as with my little book, his great contribution is a capacity to enthuse others....and that is a rare and precious talent, indeed.

TRUE CRIME

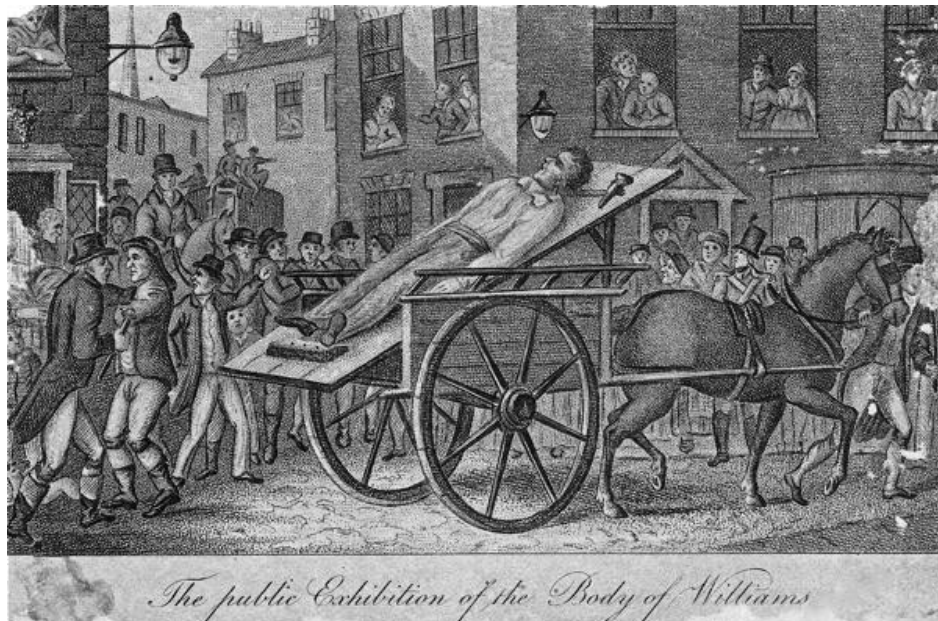
In August of 1886 workmen laying new gas pipes at the old crossroads of Cannon Street and Cable Street, near St George in the East, London, made a gruesome

discovery - the skeleton of a young man...staked through the heart. The gruesome find prompted the blustering barkeep of the *Crown and Dolphin* to snatch the deceased's skull from distressed City officials, giving it pride of place above his bar....

But we'll come back to that.

I collect victims. Not *actual* victims, obviously: I don't maintain a menagerie of unfortunate gulls or gudgeons, or 'mementos' of their sundry sufferings – though I do own a Prayer-Book bound in the skin of 19th-century 'Bodysnatcher' and serial-killer, Billy Burke gifted to me by an eccentric antiquary I did some research for, years ago. Rest assured *The Happy Hangman* is *not* a media-friendly sociopathic soubriquet. No. I collect the *stories* of victims.

Somebody has to.



The public Exhibition of the Body of Williams
The wrong man? John Williams, condemned as the 'Ratcliffe Highway Murderer'

Why it should matter to me that I remember the names of '60s Glasgow strangler, Bible John's victims - Patricia Docker, Jemima McDonald and Helen Puttock? I don't know. They seem like nice girls, by all accounts, but I was never likely to know them. I would, by all reckoning, have avoided the brash, brassy Wilma McCann – first victim of the 'Yorkshire Ripper' – but it matters to me, for some reason, that I am aware that her sad life ended on Prince Philip Playing Fields, Leeds, in October 1975. Were I of a philosophical bent I might be inclined to cite jolly John Donne on the subject: "*No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*" In short: we should give a damn because there for the grace of God...

As posited in my last column, I first dipped by toe in the bloody pool of True Crime courtesy of Dan Farson's brief account of the 1888 'Jack the Ripper' murders in his *Beaver Book of Horror*. Farson's phrasing, re-reading this short article, strikes me as

significant. Possibly in consideration of the nascent sensibilities of his audience he never once mentions that they were prostitutes – the sole personal detail which has dominated every other account of the crimes which consumed them I have ever read. He calls them '*pathetic...women who had come down in the world and stayed in dismal doss-houses if they could afford the few pennies to do so*'.

Wow.

Because he's writing for kids, the author does something most 'serious' writers and researchers completely fail to do – he *immediately* engages our sympathies: they were victims because they were *easy prey*. Re-reading this text, I could suddenly, vividly remember my youthful outrage that we remembered Jolly Jack because he oh-so-helpfully gave himself a 'Trade Name' (unsurprisingly suspected to be the invention of a local hack), but forgot all about those poor women. It was as if they didn't really matter: it was *his* story.

I was intrigued. I picked up Donald Rumbelow's 1975 tome, *The Complete Jack the Ripper*, the only book, ever, to give me nightmares, though I was twelve years old when I first read it, which gave gritty texture to the tweely Dickensian Victorian London of my imagination, and introduced me to M.J. Drutt (Farson's favourite), Severin Koslowski, Dr Pedachenko, Neill Cream, Dr William Gull, and the other Usual Suspects.

'Jack' was a Jew, a Tsarist assassin, a vivisectionist, a mad poet, a vengeful syphilitic rake, an occultist intent on creating a ritual Scarlet Woman, a reformer intent on drawing attention to the horrendous slum conditions of the East End, a deranged midwife ('Jill the Ripper', no less), a Mason, the Duke of Clarence (that's George V to you, plebs!). Every racial or socio-political prejudice has been catered for. Gary Rowlands put forward a case - no more of less compelling than that levelled against most of the names already mentioned - for Dr Barnardo being the killer – a clever jape, revealing the pitfalls of fitting facts to support a spurious theory. Mark Daniel, argues, quite convincingly, that the histrionic hoopla surrounding these homicides unintentionally created a superb and utterly impenetrable smokescreen for the real killer. As for Patricia Cornwell's hysterical high-profile assault on courtly gadabout and media-whore Walter Sickert...well, if I ever run out of toilet paper the 99p I forked out for it in the Bookworld bargain-bins will *still* be too high a price to pay.

We will never know who committed these crimes. Never. Not a bloody (pun intended) chance. Why? Because two police forces – City and Metropolitan – were competing against one another to solve crimes they didn't understand at the centre of the biggest media circus, in history. No consistency. No collaboration. An epistemological. I find the theories of Martin Fido, Euan MacPherson and others fascinating, but only as intellectual exercises in contemplation of what DeQuincey termed, in 1827, '*Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts*'.

I don't care *Who* 'Jack the Ripper' was. '*What?*' and '*Why?*' are far more interesting questions. I favour the likes of Philip Sugden's stately *Jack the Ripper: The Complete*

History, published in 1994, and I agree with Farson that this is the 'definitive account' of the crimes - which reject theorising or speculative obfuscations, and make the London of 1888 a vital, vibrant, terrifyingly real place – or works such as Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *'from Hell'*, which makes no claim of veracity, but, instead, seeks to see how the history and myth-story of these crimes evolved, intertwining inseparably.

Why does 'Jack' fascinate us? 'He' has featured in innumerable films, TV shows, plays and books – matching wits with everyone from Sherlock Holmes to Captain Kirk. The racial bogey-men favoured by past generations have been supplanted by our own pop-culture ghouls du jour – vampires, demons, aliens.... utterly divorced from the reality.

There's no shortage of unsolved violent crime for sensation hounds to slaver over. Contemporaneous with the 'Ripper' murders we have the *'Embankment Murders'* (or *'Thames Torso Murders'*, 1887-89). These affected the same city, showed a greater, more controlled and premeditated brutality – yet they were overshadowed at the time, and are now almost entirely forgotten.

Which leads us back to the skeleton crossroads. His name was John Williams (or Murphy) a Scottish (or Irish) seaman who was hastily tried, convicted and publicly hanged - after he had committed suicide (or been murdered) in custody – for the brutal murders of Timothy and Celia Marr and their infant son, shop-boy James Gowan, publicans John and Elizabeth Williamson, and their servant Bridget Harrington, in 1811. These *'Ratcliffe Highway Murders'* were the *first* criminal sensation to hit the British Press...and the model of what was to follow in '88. Hysteria. Political showmanship. Passing-the buck. The demonising of outsiders – like the poor sod staked at the crossroads.

Williams was almost certainly innocent, but he fitted the bill. The mob had what they wanted. There was no 'mystery', and the story died...until a young sailor's skull was propped above the bar as a conversation piece in the *Crown and Dolphin*.

As I say: I collect victims.

TALL STORIES

I tell stories. A *lot* of stories. As a performer I relish the experience of hooking an audience with the nicely-turned twist of a tale. Making them jump. Making them laugh. Live storytelling is becoming a lost art – a shame, as it's something just about everyone can do, and there is no shortage of raw materials on every street, in every town in the land. This stuff is the *'Cultural Currency'* of our communities, and it's being eroded all the time by a homogenised mass-market media. Let's face it, most people probably have a better grasp of the history of Coronation Street or Albert Square than they do of the lane, wynd or estate they grew up on.

Mind you, I don't subscribe to the folklore-purist's view that storytelling is something that should be fixed in time: that tales exist as absolute entities, complete in themselves.

That's nonsense. The 'personal touch' is what establishes the rapport any entertainer, storyteller or stand-up enjoys with his audience. It's what makes good storytelling unique.

Stories evolve in all manner of quaint and curious ways. Sometimes they are shaped by chance – new elements added over time as generation upon generation of tellers and their own distinctive tweaks and tropes, sometimes transforming the original tale beyond all recognition - or this narrative renovation can be a more calculated process.

Local legend in Stirling has it that Jock Rankin, the Royal Burgh's last torturer, choked to death on a chicken bone after greedily guzzling a bowl of broth, and that his guttural gagging can still be heard in the shadows of his old haunt, the Tollbooth jail. Complete nonsense. He died of old age on his brother's farm in Ayr, but the dramatic irony of his imagined passing – a hangman choking to death - was so irresistible to the townsfolk that it became accepted as *truth* even while he was still alive. They wanted the fiction to be true.



Myself as the larger-than-life legendary Jock Rankin

Legend has it that the ruinous Mar's Wark – late 16th-century townhouse of John Erskine, Earl of Mar and third Regent of Scotland during the infancy of James VI – was never completed because the Protestant (and cheapskate) Mar toppled the walls of Catholic Cambuskenneth Abbey to steal-away the bricks he needed for construction. He was cursed by the Abbot – who, aside from his holy duties, was feared far and wide as a powerful Black Magician (terrible...the Pope *hates* Moonlighters!) His house was never finished, his family fortunes failed...blah-de-blah!. All true. *Up to a point*. Mar's Wark was

never finished, his family *did* fall from courtly grace and honour, but the fearful '*Curse of Alloa Tower*' which predicted the perils faced by his bloodline was *utter balls* - concocted more than a century *after* John Erskine's death by Courtly rivals who, observing his superstitious descendant '*Bobbing John*' Mar's dithering dalliance with Jacobitism in the run-up to the 1715 Rising, wanted to remind the errant Earl of the error of pissing off the side with Papal support.

Similarly, those familiar with the lore of the Ladies' Hill – the stern, rocky promontory which dominates the centre of the Holy Rude Cemetery - *know* that it was here that the blind evangelist Alick Lyon battled with the Devil, defending the selfsame drunkards and dullards who taunted him for his Temperance. That Blind Alick was so named because he was *blind-drunk* six nights out of seven, had been cast out of his strict Presbyterian kirk for his wanton ways, and died alone and unlamented in his lodging-house in King Street – known to his ironically inclined neighbours as 'Quality Street', as all the muck and mire of the Old Town streets gathered there and low property-prices made in the natural home for the town's brothels, gambling-dens and doss-houses – is conveniently forgotten.

The true irony of this tale is that though the Temperance movement latched onto Alick's legend and made it popular, the story itself seems to have evolved into its familiar form courtesy of the *Whistlebinkies* and the *Seannachie* – the storytellers and entertainers who regaled drinkers in the ale-houses through the long winter nights. In most versions he vanishes in a puff of fire and brimstone by striking Auld Hornie with his Bible, sacrificing his own prospect of rising again upon the Sounding of the Last Trump - but saving the souls of Stirling's sinners.

Um...why does an 18th-century blind man need a bloody Bible? And doesn't it diminish the impact of his fiery finale when you can see his gravestone in the grounds of the old Erskine Marykirk (currently the Youth Hostel)? Nah. The tale's the thing!

As as a *folklorist* I love tracing back the evolutionary line of these legends, as they reveal a great deal about the prejudices and preoccupations of our predecessors. As a *storyteller* I relish the miraculous malleability of Story as an organic entity. I've used our 'Manic Street Preacher' in many scripts and stories over the past years – as hero and hypocrite, fearless *Defender of the Faith* and foolish fall-guy. I've told the tale from the perspective of the blustrous barkeep who cast him out into the street on the night he 'died', and of the Devil himself – set upon by a belligerent drunk while he was enjoying some 'down-time' on the Ladies' Hill. I've added my own 'window dressing' from time to time (such as giving the aforementioned barkeep a *name* – Tam Bone (rambunctious proprietor of the Stirling Arms, in the 1790s– and as good a candidate for that particular supporting role as any), and found them picked up on and employed by other storytellers.

Same story. Same broad narrative strokes...but capable of infinite reinventions – adapting to contemporary concerns and different storytelling environments: grim and

gritty is great for a small group on a dark and stormy windswept eve, but the quaint and comic works so much better on a busier, breezier sun-shiney day.

If you can tell a Joke or recite a dirty limerick you have all the skills you need to be a storyteller – so find a tale, and tell it. We have some of the best raw-materials for fantastic fantasy and horror on our doorsteps, and ignore it in favour of bland homogenised crap. So what if most of it is founded on nothing more than piss and wind. That's not the point. *Story* is the point, and, as I've said before on these pages, *you should never let a little thing like the truth get in the way of a good story.*

WATCHING THE DETECTIVES

Once upon a time if you had a mystery to be solved, a murderer to be discovered, or a dastardly deed undone it wasn't the common or garden Rozzers that you called upon. Dear me, no. What would the neighbours say? The likes of *Lestrade*, *Gregson* and *Slack* were all very well for the grunt work, you understand, but persons of *substance* seemed more inclined to call upon the services of the gifted amateur. The more aristocratic, affected and eccentric the better.

Poe's bibliophile *Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin* set the ball a-rolling in the very first modern detective story – *The Murders In The Rue Morgue* (1841) – the infamous first member of an illustrious literary fortiori fraternity. The gentrified heroes of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman In White* (1859) and *The Moonstone* (1868) may have lacked *Dupin's* theatrical flair, but they were – especially in the latter tale – better suited to *discreetly* dealing in the affairs of the aristocratic tykes they walked amongst. The doughty Bow Street Runner, *Sergeant Cuff*, may well be a stout and honourable chap, well appointed to chum-up with the servants and stewards of the noble *Verinder* household, but...well...he's not a gentleman, and it's left to the *Honourable* (and far less interesting) *Franklin Blake* to resolve the riddle of the Moonstone.

Cuff, incidentally, was greatly influenced by the Scotland Yard's own Jack Whicher, much mentioned in the press of the 1860s through his dogged investigation of the brutal murder of a child at Road Hill House, Wiltshire – in which he was continually frustrated by the attitude that a commoner had no place prying into the private lives of persons of good family...irrespective of the fact that one of them was almost certainly a bloody murderer. Seek out Kate Summerscale's excellent *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2008) for more details. Sadly no haughty *Master Blake* was on hand to ensure that justice was done.

Sayers *Lord Peter Wimsey*, Christie's *Poirot* and *Mr Satterthwaite* (Miss Marple isn't aristocratic, as such, but the old gel does seem to be *awfully* well-connected), the underrated Marjorie Allingham's *Albert Campion* all continued the tradition well established by a certain *Mr Holmes* of Baker Street of gleefully traducing the good name of the Plod at every opportunity. Even Ngaio Marsh's *Roderic Alleyn* – an actual copper

– was of titled stock. Coke-fiends, monocle-wearers, gastronomes, bibliophiles, poets, orchid fanciers...and all likely to crop up in the Society pages, doncha know.



Crime Caricature (Murder By Death 1976)

Detective fiction was, pretty much until the '20s (much later in the UK) the domain of what Lee Server calls (in his 1993 history of pulp fictions *Danger Is My Business*) 'twitty aristos and eccentric puzzle-solvers...the murders emotionally bloodless'. Detection was a distraction: a hobby for the upper-set

Was that the point? Possibly. Escapism lies at the heart of all popular fictions, after all.

So what changed? World War One, basically. by real life horrors of blood, thunder, fear and doubt the triviality of traditional crime fictions was exploded. Imagining the malefic machinations of some master-villain lost something of its appeal when domestic desperations and doubts were prompting more visceral horrors on every street. The world was changing, and the glittering gentry – the *Officer Class* – lost much of their shine. Murder was returned, according to Raymond Chandler, to 'the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse and with means at hand, not hand-wrought duelling pistols, curare or tropical fish'.

The first of this Hard-Boiled Brotherhood of working stiffs, walking tall with a gat, a tarnished sense of honour and the hope of risking life and limb for little more than '\$20 a day, plus expenses' (gas and whisky) was Carol John Daly's *Terry Mack* – appearing in the May 1923 issue of *Black Mask* magazine. Both writer and gumshoe are all but forgotten, but their influence was – and remains – impressive. Daly's spare, metaphoric first-person prose and his hard-drinkin', sharp-shootin', fast talkin' flatfoot set the tone for just about every private-dick who followed...predating (and outselling during his heyday)

Dashiell Hammett's (unnamed) *Continental Op* agent and *Sam Spade* – normally credited as the first great modern detectives, and also regulars in *Black Mask* – by quite some time. The upper classes appeared in these tales, of course, but were rarely esteemed or held in high regard. The boot was well and truly on the other (hob-nailed and re-soled) foot.

Daly lacked the wit of Hammett, the flair and variety of a Leslie Charteris or Erle Stanley Gardner, or the insight or poetry of Raymond Chandler (and any man who can write '*Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.*' Is a bloody poet, in my book !) but his narrative – in tales such as *The White Circle* (1926), *The Snarl of the Beast* (1927), *Tainted Power* (1931), and *Mr. Strang* (1936) has an energy and immediacy which endeared itself to me while reading '30s and '40s issues of *Black Mask* and *Spicy Detective Stories* as a teenager – the property of a retired Polish sailor who lived in the next block of flats, through whom I also discovered the Pulp delights of *Doc Savage*, *The Shadow*, *The Spider* and *The Green Lama* (but that's another story).

Was this world any more real than that of the '*twitty aristos*'? Not. Chandler called his hero '*a fantastic creation who acts and speaks like a real man in every sense but one, that...in life as we know it such a man would not be a private detective.*' Chandler's reluctant White Knight, *Philip Marlowe*, or Daly's *Mack* or *Race Williams* may not inhabit the world of the real-life snoops – but they were born on the same Mean Streets - surviving and succeeding by their wits. Theirs is a meritocracy, their motives and methods understandable and attainable – a little smarter, sharper and more intuitive than us, but *us*, nonetheless.

ON HEROES AND HERO WORSHIP

Dr Roma Chatterji argues - in *The Voyage of the Hero* (1986) - that we don't so much choose our heroes as they choose us - characters and archetypes which reflect our personal proclivities and aspirations: if we cannot *identify* with heroic protagonists then we cannot be drawn fully into their tales, empathise with or glory in their efforts. Grand deeds, virtue and derring-do are just not enough.

This is certainly very true of the classic mythologies of fantasy and adventure, where the Ordinary Joe is tested – and, as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949) assures us - the trials and tribulations our hero endures are the foundations of the Hero's Quest – by quite extraordinary circumstances and seemingly insurmountable odds. The farm boy tending his Moisture Vaporators on a distant planet, the High School nerd on a science trip and the home-loving Hobbit all appeal directly to those who crave something more enervating than the drearily domestic drudge of a daily life. There, but for the grace of midichlorians, radioactive spiders and magic rings goes *us*...

So, what does my own choice of heroes say about *me*, I wonder?



Doctor in the House (Jon Pertwee)

(c) BBC

My first was, as with so many British lads of my age, *The Doctor*. The Jon Pertwee *Doc*, that is: stylish, confident, insubordinate and always (always) right. Not much parity, there, with a straightlaced brat growing up in a shitty little Scottish New Town. *The Doctor* – my Doctor – could do no wrong, though...until he abandoned me for the shambling horror that was *Worzel Gummidge*. I remember delivering an impassioned playground rant at the bloody Space Hippy that usurped him– only to be quickly beguiled by Baker's puckish charm. He clearly relished his oddity. Unlike most action heroes he never (if at all) threw the first punch, embraced his position as an eternal outsider, and invariably responded to any globe-threatening universal horror by offering the nasty cardboard alien responsible a Jelly Baby. He was still as insubordinate, mind, but he was...odd. I like 'Odd'. I can relate to 'Odd'. Smarts and sweets...it's a good combo!

Sherlock Holmes' reliance on brains over brawn, appealed to me. I was an inquisitive brat, and his entreaty that we should seek to see and observe appealed to me. *Captain Kirk* was all very well, but he spent too much time pointlessly running around and getting shot at. *Sherlock* could do the business from the comfort of his armchair. As a lazy little sod that appealed to me, too.

Then came *Zorro* and *Batman*. More physical than my former faves - and I could never really see the appeal of life-threatening acrobatics - but more theatrical, too. An aristocrat and an industrial heir whose lifestyles and origins were as alien to me as *Superman's*. *More*, in fact – as at least young *Clark* had grown up in a working-class community. But, as with young *Master Kent*, their backgrounds constantly led others to *underestimate* them. Painfully aware of the prejudices of middle-class classmates and overbearing teachers, I didn't wear a mask (or a cape) to show my true colours, but I learned many lessons in self-expression from *The Fox* and *The Bat*. I may even owe

them my choice of profession, as an actor – where (if I'm doing my job properly) the 'real' me – my 'Secret Identity' - is hidden from view.

My heroes are all contrarians. Irrespective of status or privilege, they *choose* to put themselves in harm's way, or to take the 'less travelled path' in *spite* of – not *because* of – their personal circumstances. They create their secret selves through years of effort and are venerated by their peers because they have *earned* merit. Very little was ever expected of me, as a child, chiefly because of *where* and *when* I was raised: that I chose an academic and artistic route through life when I was told time and time again that just *wasn't* an option owes a huge amount to my mother's conviction that we shape ourselves, but I think *Bruce*, *Diego* and the *Doc* have to share part of the blame for moulding me into such a determined contrarian.

Chandler's *Philip Marlowe* ("I test high for insubordination!") and Harper Lee's greatest creation, *To Kill A Mockingbird's Atticus Finch* share that characteristic. They do the *right thing* because it *is* the right thing to do, *not* because it's what's *expected* of them. *Atticus*, interestingly, is the only character mentioned, thus far, who does not set himself *above* the Law, and consequently earns more ire than the faux-cynic 'shop-soiled Galagad' *Marlowe* by doing so. Still, as my old Dad used to say "It's good to be hated by all the *right* people!" My real-life heroes – William Wilberforce, Paul Robeson and Clarence Darrow – all seem to have lived by the same rule...though I met them *much later* in life.

So, what qualities do I share with my fictional heroes. Theatricality? *Oh* yes. A contrary nature and disdain for undeserved rank or authority? *Yup*. A conviction that we make our own destiny? *I think so*. A belief in meritocracy and social justice, and a desire to act on those beliefs. *I bloody hope so*.

Of course the main point of parity is a crap love life. *Batman* has the occasional tumble with *Talia* and *Catwoman*, but spends much of his time trying to lock them up ("*Paging Dr Freud!*"), the *Doctor's* only significant squeeze in seven centuries copped off with an inferior version of him and bugged off to another dimension ("*Sigmund...where are you?*"), *Marlowe* flirts a lot, true, but never actually gets the girl...usually because they are trying to kill him ("*Look, is Jung available??*"), *Atticus* is a widower, and as for *Sherlock...oh dear*.

Zorro is the exception. He got the girl. He's also the *only* one of my heroes I've ever been asked to play – as a costumed MC at a Valentine's dinner, a couple of years back. I declined the role – I'm a tad more rotund than the dashing *Don Diego*, and the prospect of (over)filling his tights seemed a tad disrespectful...and I didn't relish the prospect of making *The Fox* an unwilling gooseberry intruding on others' romantic ruminations.

Tina sang 'We don' need another hero!' I think *I* might.

IN THE ZONE

I've said previously that I'm not a huge Sci-Fi fan. 'Twas not always so, gentle reader: betwixt the ages of nine and fifteen I was a nascent Jedi, relished BBC2's Autumnal early evening seasons of '50s fantasy, and scarfed every Scientifictional fancy shelved in my public library. For the period of my pubescence – my biochemistry mutated by testosterone and majestic doses of Clearasil – my reading was dominated by tales of more terrifying transmogrifications.

I Was A Teenage Trekkie, and would regularly make audio recordings of Monday night re-runs (the *Next Generation* was hardly a twinkle in the Gene Genie's eye, back then – and very few people had the futuristic luxury of a VCR), to listen to in dead of night...before yielding to dreams of *Tribbles*, *Tholian Webs* and *Mudd's women*...(though not simultaneously).

I retain most of my childhood tomes, but – save for James Blish's '60s *Trek* adaptations – precious few books of Sci-Fi and Fantasy remain amongst them. Only handful of genre authors – Tolkien, James, Poe and Huxley – have remained a constant presence on my bookshelves since my teenage years.

Though fond of *Buffy Summers* and her illusive ilk, there were very few Sci-Fi series I'd make a point of watching on a regular basis. I'd never seen an episode of *Babylon 5* or *Stargate SG1* until July of this year, and while the adventures of *Captains Picard*, *Sisko* and *Janeway* were known to me, none exerted the same attentive tractor-beam my teenage self had known, courtesy of *Kirk & co.* I've recently enjoyed *Deep Space Nine* and other '80s and '90s 'classics' – courtesy of a mammoth pile of DVDs given to me by an un-cluttering Mexico-bound friend – but doubt I'd have made the effort to watch 'em, otherwise. Too many of these shows – *The X-Files* was a *terrible* offender in this regard – required an attention to detail and near obsessive-compulsive reverence for continuity that I wasn't prepared to let intrude upon my weekly schedules.

The exception to this – and you *knew* there had to be one – was (and remains) Rod Serling's oft-imitated, rarely matched and *never* surpassed anthology series, *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964).

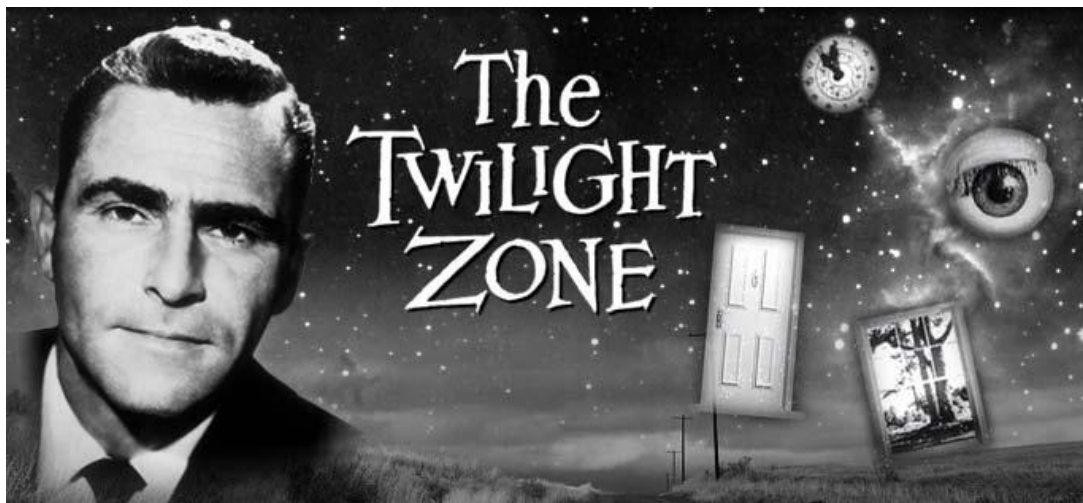
First encountered – like *Sgt Bilko* – as a filler 'twixt the Saturday horror double-bills on BBC2's '70s summer schedules, this show immediately hooked me, reeled me in, and has had me devotedly flapping around on the deck of gratuitously extended metaphor ever since.

Even at the age of nine I was aware that this was *The Good Stuff*.

The first episode I can firmly, fondly recall – crammed in between *Dracula's Daughter* and *The Wolfman* (they made a lovely couple) – was '*The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street*', like most of the series' offerings by the prolific powerhouse of a host, Mr Serling himself. It sees the citizens of a quiet, unremarkable Middle-American suburb. "*This is*

Maple Street on a late Saturday afternoon." Serling's stilted drawl tells us. "...*Maple Street, in the last calm and reflective moments...before the monsters came..!*" Perplexed by peculiar blackouts and power surges, paranoia runs riot on this oh-so-ordinary lane. Hysteria and murder ensue as neighbour takes up arms against the neighbour they now suspect of causing this disruption of their daily drudge. At a safe distance aliens gloat that all it takes to conquer so a population so primitive as ours is to take us outside our 'comfort zone' – through, say, tinkering with our electrical supply – then sit back and wait while we wipe ourselves out. Serling's closing narration reiterates the ever-prescient point of the tale: "*There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill, and suspicion can destroy, and the frightened, thoughtless search for a scapegoat has a fallout all of its own: for the children, and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is that these things can not be confined to the Twilight Zone.*"

Ooooh.



Rod Serling's Meisterwork

Now I realised, even as a quot, that the titular '*Monsters*' weren't the aliens but the paranoid residents of that utterly *average* suburban street, and that fear makes ogres of us all – but I only understood quite how *bold* this commentary was much later in life. The issue of a contrived public panic – something McCarthy, Cohn and others in the US establishment had striven so successfully to do – was a contentious one. Such a topic could not be addressed directly in a popular entertainment – an earlier Serling drama, '*The Arena*' (1956 - a sort of '50s *West Wing*) was hobbled by his politicians being forbidden by the network to say anything *political*. Careers had been ruined for less. Mind you, if the *Reds Under The Bed* happened to be *aliens*? Well...that's *different*, isn't it. Similar political allegories were addressed in '*The Shelter*' (1961) which ended on an equally simple, radical message "*For civilization to survive, the human race has to remain civilized.*"

Parables, allegories, meditations on the moral and philosophical ramifications of one's choices – '*To Serve Man*', the delightfully nasty '*Time Enough At Last*', '*Mr Destry on*

Doomsday, the deeply creepy *Living Doll*, the list goes on and on and the quality of performance and production rarely dips below utterly frakking marvellous – this was, as I said, Sci-Fi for grown ups – the televisual equivalent of a well-crafted Ray Bradbury tale.

It's rival on the airwaves, *The Outer Limits*, was perhaps more flashy, and certainly had it's moments, but it rarely matched the subtlety and economy of expression of Serling's little kingdom of the weird. You want beasties and bogey-men, aliens, mutants and the like? *Roll up! Roll up!* They are there for all to see. You want something *more*...something that has a *point*, a *message*...or, better yet, a *question*...? That's there too. After all, it *is* the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call *The Twilight Zone*.

I've been a regular visitor there since I was nine years old. And you may take that any way you wish.

KING OF DUNCES

I've talked a lot about people I admire on these pages. Seems only fair to give a git a mention.



A complete arse

portrait by John Simon

I doubt you've heard of Colley Cibber (1671–1757). If so, you are most fortunate. He was a man of little talent: a braggart, a bully, a con-man...and one of the most famous men of his era. Thankfully fickle fame and the combined forces of taste and time have put paid to that.

He was the first of a new breed - the Actor-Managers who would come to dominate London's theatres for two centuries. He joined the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, under Christopher Rich, in the early 1690s with hopes of becoming a romantic hero, but – on being brusquely reminded by his employer that he was crap, short, pallid and had '*melancholy Prospect*' of ever playing a scene with the luminous leading lady of the age (the wonderfully named Mrs Bracegirdle) decided on another strategy. As Shakespeare's Richard III (to whom we shall return anon, my Lords...) might have put it

*"...since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days
I am determined to prove a villain"*

And that he did. Through devious devices and theatrical chicaneries the Bard's baddie would have been proud of, he colluded with other disgruntled bit-players to oust Rich. Ditching his co-conspirators in a 'palace coup', he was enthroned as sole Monarch of the Royal – the largest, most fashionable, and popular of the London theatres. His rambling autobiography, *An Apology For the Life of Colly Cibber* (1740) flits over the fitful finagling which charted his rise to power, but relates – with that woeful lack of irony which has always typified the self-proclaimed genius - the horrors that would follow.

To be fair, he was popular with the actors working under him. Aware that the carnaptious Christopher Rich's rigid regime had encouraged his underlings to rebel, he paid good wages – giving his thesps no opportunity to oust him. He employed the prettiest, most engaging ingénues (talent *really* wasn't an issue as long as they attracted the lads), the most dashing dandies and rollicking roister-doisters (for the ladies). He tailored his own original scripts to suit the flash, flirty, flip and frivolous flights of fashionable fancy. In short, gentle readers, he was the first great exponent of that most wretched of cultural tropes...'*dumbing down*'. He '*crucified*' Moliere and did quite astonishing things to Shakespeare, giving the greatest of his Tragedies, *King Lear*, a *happy* ending, tinkering with the Histories to brown-nose Walpole and his ilk - adding Papist intrigues to *King John*, in 1745 - as Jacobite/Catholic paranoia swept the Capital.

Colly's *Richard III* – *Cibberstein's Monster*, as I prefer to think of it – is worth a mention. Cruelly cobbled together from the dismembered parts of *four* different Shakespeare plays, carelessly sutured – often mid-speech – by his own distinctively desperately stitched doggerel. And – because his only passable performance ability (according to critics) was for comic foppery, *that* became the key-note of the character (he cast himself in leading roles, even in his sixties and seventies). One can almost imagine him slapping his thigh – the very model of eye-rolling moustache-twirling panto villainy - as he declaims "*Ha! Off with his head! So much for Buckingham!*"

Shakespeare's Richard III is my favourite play. Bar none. It's a very subtle, scary, and surprisingly funny play - with the Crook-back aping the formal Vice of the popular Mediaeval Morality plays, in the manner of stand-up comedian. Will's anti-hero tells the audience *exactly* what he's going to do to those who stand in his path to power,

confident that they will support him because while most of those he preys upon are every bit as avaricious and vile as he, he's...well...*funnier*. He's right. *Cibber's Richard III* is *pure* Abanazer. Unfortunately, like panto, it was cheap, nasty, as subtle as a sandpaper suppository...and *unfathomably* popular with audiences. Although *none* of his own plays or other Shakespeare adaptations endured beyond his own lifetime, his *Richard* – like *Frankenstein's Creature* – proved difficult to kill. It lumbered simple-mindedly through the nation's theatres until well into the 20th-century – and was, largely, the version committed to film by Sir Laurence Olivier, in 1955. That Larry's central performance has become the melodramatic model of hystrionic ham is the one enduring legacy of Cibber's dramatic career.

The really odd thing about Cibber is that, even within his lifetime, people knew he was crap. He became *Poet Laureate*, in 1730, solely because he brown-nosed Horace Walpole. This earned him the ire of many worthy wordsmiths. 'Sour grapes' you might assume, from those envious of his star's twinkling ascent. Perhaps true of the worthy (but desperately dull) Richard Blackmore and John Dennis ...though not of already lauded literary luminaries - Jonathan Swift, John Gay and Daniel Defoe. Henry Fielding, while serving as a Justice of the Peace, issued a mock warrant for his arrest for "*murder of the English language*" and Alexander Pope recalled a popular anonymous epigram of the day in the introduction of his mock-epic *Dunciad* (1728)

*In merry old England it once was a rule,
The King had his Poet, and also his Fool:
But now we're so frugal, I'd have you to know it,
That Cibber can serve both for Fool and for Poet.*

Cibber's biggest mistake, in response to Pope's criticism, was to mocked his abnormally short stature (the result of childhood illness) and "'little-tiny manhood". Poets are very protective of their privates, and the Augustan scribbler had the last laugh - revising his most lauded poetic work, to install Cibber as the '*King of Dunces*' in the revised *Dunciad* of 1743. For all his boasting and bluster the talentless git became little more than a footnote in someone else's work...his own venal verses utterly (and deservedly) forgotten.

So, friends, when we look around us at the Uwe Bolls, Dan Browns and Lob Liefields of this world and despair at the perplexing veneration of mediocrity which allows them to thrive...take heart. They are part of a time-honoured tradition..and they, too, shall go the way of the King of Dunces!

HERO'S QUEST

Bill and Ted were, famously, lied to by their album covers. Mind you, the delights of their Powell and Prestburger Heaven more than made up for any disappointments Hollywood Hell may have provided them in their direst hour.

I, too, faced disillusionment, gentle readers, though in my case 'twas in the area of employment.

From an early age I nurtured a desire to put on tights and kick the crap out of people – no, not a psychotic Billy Elliot, a super-hero! But *how* to secure an entry-level position and begin my career...?

Being a Bat-fan, it seemed most logical to arrange the traumatic shooting of a family member. My folks weren't keen on that idea - and we lacked Bruce's billions. Discovery of intergalactic orphanhood might prompt this plucky hero-in-waiting to pull his pants over his tights, and pop down to Capes-R-Us – but, no, my dear Mum was at pains to point out that (despite appearances) my origins were depressingly terrestrial.



I had first announced my intentions when asked by a kindly old auntie what I wanted to be when I grew up. I replied that I'd *quite* like to be a Minister (of the Church of Scotland variety) or a Wrestler, but I'd *really* like to be a crimefighter. No (*daft old trout!*), *not* a *Policeman...a Crimefighter...with batarangs, a nifty suped-up auto, a rogues gallery of easily disposable theme-tastic villains, a code-name...and a cape.*

It was the cape that did it - the first Halloween costume I fashioned for myself combined my sister's green leggings and red blouson shirt...and a purple curtain cloak (these were the early '70s - such domestic horrors were commonplace), the garish livery of the Golden Age *Green Lantern*.. I *liked* capes. That swish accessory was, after all, the only thing that preachers, '70s Wrestlers and Crusaders had in common. As far as I'm aware, the Reverend Petrie had never actually punched a sinful parishioner's lights out with a cry of "*Take that, evildoer!*": the Kirk Session being big on righteousness, but none too keen on congregational smackdowns. Mind you, he *did* move to Dundee, shortly afterwards...

Richard Wilson nicking my packed lunch on a school trip to Culzean Castle, while *annoying* - and an almost *certain* indicator of nascent criminality - was *hardly* sufficient cause to me to pull on a cowl and wreak revenge upon my ickle playmates (though, ironically, they *were* a superstitious, cowardly lot!). I lacked motivation.

I was quite chuffed when I heard that my Dad had worked for the NRPB - the National Radiological Protection. Radiation *and* Protection. Surely it couldn't be long before he'd suffer some nicely timed isotope-related mishap and be granted enhanced senses, super-speed or a tendency, when irked, to turn green and split his pants (though his heritable pie-fondness could achieve that end with no additional irradiated aid). Sadly all he got was a huge workload and a coronary (the fault of the pies, not the plutonium!). I felt cheated. My hopes of superheroic *apprenticeship* - I had planned on a bit of YTS on-the-job training as a Kid Sidekick - were thwarted.

My imagination being the only part of me that could be termed '*overactive*', I thought of procuring a proxy, better suited to bearing the slings and arrows of...well...*slings and arrows*. Thusly, while others whined at the variable vagaries of the Caledonian climate, I *embraced* this blustrious native inclemency with the hopes that I might be struck by lightning and enjoy temporary transmogrification - incarnating a titanically toned Norse demigod, electrical elemental or mystical avatar. *Big Red Cheese* or inappropriately syntaxed demigod? I wasn't bothered, as long as I had a cape - a *really big* cape.

"*Shazam!*" I'd cry, as the thunder rolled! "*All-Father Odin, hark unto thine goodly heir!*" Nope. All I got when I was finally struck by lightning, much later in life, was second degree burns. I *should* have known better. If Auld Scotia's propensity for barometric brouhaha was connected to it's heroic legacy our annals would be choc-a-block with metahuman Macs. Forget the *God of Thunder*, *Rain Man* would be more our luck. Looking at Gordon Brown - great with numbers, but dourly lacking in social skills - I might not be far wrong...

As I grew older the super-powered fraternity fell from my favour. *Batman* and *Green Arrow* remained. Possibly because they were all-too human, and unreliable on serendipitous sleight-of-hand and conveniently posited alien artifacts, magical charms or non-carcinogenic radioactive mishap for their heroic habits; possibly because, as noted in a previous column, they were self-made-men exercising their self righteous zeal in spite of their privileged backgrounds.

Mainly, though, I think they appealed to me because they were...well...*pissed off*. That *worked*. I can *relate* to '*pissed off*'. They weren't granted great powers and decided, de facto, to put embrace the great responsibilities bit as...well...something to do. They were narked at the injustices of the world and determined to kick it's teeth in. I get that: I was an '80s student lefty! And, after all, my interest in social injustice was formatively fuelled by the stories of Denny O'Neill and Neal Adams in the pages of these heroes' titles. My first inkling of righteous dissent, too, came through *GA* - resigning from the ranks of the *JLA* because he thought it's mighty members were losing touch with the plebs. *Green Arrow* probably made a healthier heroic role-model than angsty old *Bats*, anyway: he seemed to have a much merrier time, had a couthy line in querulous quips, and, of course, a good *thang* going with the lovely *Black Canary*.

I never got to be a superhero. I never became a Minister or a Wrestler, either – my interest in both utterly gone by the time I reached my eighth birthday. I do, however, own a selection of big swishy capes and cowls, mostly work at night and terrify superstitious, cowardly types on a regular basis.

I am the Ghost Who Walks...I am the Night...I am *The Hangman!*

MEN IN (MY) TIGHTS

My evenings, gentle readers, are disturbed by nuisance callers. They tell me they want into my tights. This is – as their numbers do not include Audrey Tautou, Winona Ryder or Zooey Deschanel – a Bad Thing. Small mercies being what they are, at least the callers' relentless urgings do not require my being in my tights at the time.

To be fair, it isn't just the tights upon which their oleaginous attentions are focussed. My pantaloons, hose, codpieces, doublets, frock-coats, chaps, clocks, ruffs and weskits are all subject to unwelcome interest. It seems, you see, that a man in personal possession of a period wardrobe will never be friendless as Halloween approaches.



When was it that the Grown-ups all started dressing up for Halloween?

This sudden, seasonal popularity is now an established feature of my calendar. People I haven't heard of in *months* - *years*, sometimes - call me up out of the blue to *chew the fat*, *shoot the breeze* and generally *schmooze* the night away. They *haven't heard from me in far too long*, they tell me, and thought they'd *give me a tinkle to catch up* - their voices positively tinkling with that earnest energy that only Olympic standards of insincerity brings. My presence isn't *really* necessary at this point in proceedings: I could inform them that I was depressed, had just dismembered my dentist with a rusty Flymo, or had been declared Pope, and it wouldn't hold back their new-found enthusiasm for *Auld Lang Syne*.

They, you see, are on a *mission*.

With the inevitability of Death, Taxes and 'Friends' on E4, the “*Oh, by the way...*” moment soon dawns. “*Oh, by the way...*” they say “I’ve been asked to a Fancy Dress party. You still do all that Theatre stuff...do you know where I can get hold of a costume?” Of course what they mean is “*I know damned well you have a shitload of costumes that look a lot better than the hire-shop tat, and want you to lend me one, for nothing!*”

I’ve learned to keep a list of convenient costumiers next to my 'phone at this time of year, whose numbers I will willingly offer to any tight-minded (and *tight-fisted*) costume-hunter (“*Have you got a pen handy...?*”). These suggestions usually prompt a slight hardening of their previously puppy-soft tones. They don't just want *good clobber*, they want a *freebie* - and their desire to renew *Auld Acquaintance* generally shrivels like a turd in a heatwave when they twig that I ain't inclined to indulge 'em.

I mean, *really!* These are my bloody *work clothes*: the tools of my trade! I haven't spent years researching, designing and spending thousands in the commissioning and tailoring of a period wardrobe just so that some fickle fool can impress his chums. One careless cigarette burn, wine-spill or tearful terpsichorean trip can cause damage taking *hundreds* of Pounds to repair. They're insured for work-related mishap - *not* Act of Arse.

Perhaps it's because I spend my working days (and nights) in costume...but I really *hate* Fancy Dress. After eight hours slog as a Victorian Jailor or Regency Fop, my idea of relaxation does *not* involve playing dress-up. I get *paid* to dress a prat.

It's also the part of Fandom that I least understand. Go to any Sci-Fi or Comic convention and you will encounter clitorally-foreheaded Cardassians, Klingons and copious legions cosplayers.

I have huge admiration for their commitment - having self-tailored a good many bits of complicated period kit in my time, I'm aware of the time, effort and energy costumes creation demands. Audiences take for granted the demanding detail something as simple as a belt or sash requires. Still, though...I just don't '*get*' it. I am a huge Bat-fan, but I have never – at least since I was a Boy Wonder - ever wanted whip out my batarang in a public place.

Some time back - Googling *Supergirl* images to adorn a friend's birthday-card - I chanced upon a smiling poppet sporting a spiffy riff on the '90s Animated Series outfit. Clicking on the image led me to 'Alisa's Cosplay' - a gallery of costumes fashioned by one Alisa Farrington, inspired by Comics, Manga, Anime and Video-games. Some were really *very* impressive. Some *really* weren't. Clearly the design process excited her: a costly pastime, which she supported through a separate pay-per-view Soft Porn website (no...I didn't indulge). Oddly, though no fan of Porn, I *can* see some *point* in this: her porny pastime allows her mutual indulgence of creative and exhibitionist urges. While many fevered Fanboys are rendered positively priapic by *Kara In-Ze's* pulchritudinous paps, many in the (largely female) world of Cosplay frown on such activity. I've never wanted to shag a cartoon character, and can't really see the appeal.

Then there are the likes of Gotham Public Works - who's costumed conventioners make their own fan-films, financially supported by fees from posing as artists' models and authorized representation of publishers' properties at events and promotions. Like Professor Higgins, the profession is also their hobby, and one which allows them to indulge creative interest and imaginative inclination within a like-minded community.

Ah...'*community*'! And maybe that's the point. I don't like Fancy Dress parties...but I'm not keen on ordinary bloody parties, either. I engage my imaginative and creative impulses on a daily basis, and get paid to do so. Perhaps I don't feel the need to express my fantasy life because for me it's commonplace: it's not imaginatively or socially partitioned from mundanity. More, spending my working life surrounded by a professional community of capes and cozies, rejecting such options from my recreation is probably a subconscious separation of the public and the private.

Perhaps I'm over analyzing. No matter...my tights are my own. Hands off...unless your name is Audrey, Winona or Zooey, of course.

A GENTLEMAN OF WEALTH AND TASTE

As with so many things in my life, it started with a cape.

At least it's the cape that flutters foremost in my mind: hanging straight around the grim giant before me, sleek bible-black silk shrouding his still, silent frame, contrasting the cadaverous complexion, cheekbones Kate Moss would kill for, and the cold fire of *those* eyes. Then...*the voice*: a *basso profundo* so deep and rich that only certain species of particularly ancient and aristocratic whales could fathom it's mysteries.

'I am...*Dracula*!'

Yes in-deedy-doo, you *are*, sir...Count...Your Horrorship (how does one formally address the *Prince of Darkness*?). Oyez - that Christopher Lee certainly knew how to make an entrance. I can't remember in which of Hammer's many fangtastic frightfests I first encountered his incarnation of villainous Vlad. I know a lot of boobage was in evidence (I was beginning to noticed such things, aged eight or nine), and that nice Mr. Cushing's quiff flopped around rather dramatically...but that *really* doesn't narrow things down.

I had, of course, been witness to many a wanton Wallachian - through Bela Lugosi's charismatic mutilations of the English language, and John Carradine's avuncular dandy in the Universal frighteners of the '30s and '40s, but they were stylish rather than sinister - throwbacks to the theatrical villainies of Victorian melodrama. *Dracula* was also - like *Sherlock Holmes* - one of those archetypes one always *knew*, but without ever understanding fully *from where*: genuinely iconic, part-and-parcel of the culturally pervasive mythologies we take for granted. A cape, evening dress and slicked-back hair

are a shorthand every sketch-writer, cartoonist, and numerically inclined muppeteer understands.



The Guv'nor

(c) Hammer Studios

Lee, though, brought something *different*. More physically imposing than most and with a genuinely aristocratic bearing (well, his Mum was the Contessa Carandini di Sarzano), he effortlessly outflapped his predecessors, and while his performances occasionally verged upon Prime Transylvanian Ham, he had an intensity and sexuality which immediately engaged audiences. He wasn't just the urbane aristo...he was the direct cultural descendant of Polydori's *Lord Ruthven*: unquestionably '*mad*' (though never without method), irredeemably '*bad*', and staggeringly '*dangerous to know*'. Like his Byronic antecedent, too this was a incubus with a conspicuous sex-drive - though with no blood-pressure to speak of I've never really understood how a lusty *Son of Lillith* could attain the tumescence such nocturnal naughtiness required. No problem for our Mr. Lee, though. I know a good many Gothettes who would like to get their teeth into him, even now. I think it safe to say that Chris's charismatic Carpathian made the rest of us feel just a tad inadequate.

Now this '*Fangs For The Mammary*' approach has been blamed - quite *wrongly*, in my view - for the rise of '*Vampire Romance*' - for the moonstruck mundanity of *Edward*

Cullen and his insipid ilk, reduced from inhuman status to the category of *Unsuitable Boyfriend*.

'Romance'? Not a chance Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, scripted by the artless James M. Hart, attempted to graft toothless tearjerking toss onto Vlad's mythos - which demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the character. Lee, like Stoker's original - and it's one of the *few* points of parity betwixt these interpretations - is certainly a '*seducer*', and know the physical hunger of desire; he may '*fool around*' with his prey, but don't mistake *that* for '*romance*'. He's an *animal* - an instinctive predator - teasing and toying with his kill because it *amuses* him to do so. It's only in these moments that you see him smile...and '*If looks could kill...!*' The '*zipperless fuck*' analogy touted by Steven King, to describe the sexual subtext of the *Dracula* mythos is all very well, so long as one understands that, for the victim, their *Will* - their *choice* - can *never* be part of the equation. Disturbingly - and deliberately so, which is why the romantic-vampire trend in teen-fictions annoys me so - *Drac's* sex appeal is part of a submissive rape-fantasy.

Carradine was a charming schemer. Lugosi conveyed the oddly alien sensibility that only a Morphine addict who had learned his scripts phonetically could achieve. Palance had the whole animalistic thing down pat, but was hellishly hampered by a *truly dreadful* script and *woeful* miscasting (after all those Westerns, his Count *must* connect, somehow, to Gerber and Colan's vampiric '*Hell-Cow*', from '*Howard The Duck*' (in *Giant Size Man-Thing* #5, 1975). Oldman embraced the Method, trying to empathise with a primal character who *needs* no motivational dissection. Lee, though, casually conveyed the essential, defining characteristic of the Vampire - that it is, quite simply, a *hungry beast*. It *looks* like a man, and *walks* and *talks* like a man, but it's an *animal*, nonetheless - confident of his power and place in the food-chain. Stoker's beast brought his brood-mares - his '*Brides*' - *Jonathan Harker*, like a Panther offering up scraps to it's cubs, and if you look at the iconic image of Lee's *Drac* in action, there's more than a spark of that hungry beastie in evidence. However nice a collar you put on your prize pedigree Persian, it's *still* a bloody predator - and only a fool would underestimate the merry hell it will loose on other, smaller, weaker animals if left to it's own devices.

I've only *once* played a vamp - not *Dracula*, sad to tell, but a comic variation on randy old *Ruthven* - in a special *Halloween Stirling GhostWalk*, in 2002, largely devised to allow my performing partner to Vamp it up in a rather more ghoulishly glam fashion than usual - but even then I tried to keep alive '*The Beast In Me*'. As I flapped my cape across the ruinous rooftop of Stirling's Mar's Wark, fangs bared, advancing on some tremulous totty in the audience, I thought of Mr Lee. I thought, too, of the angsty-wangsty nicey-Ricey wannabes that seek to supplant his throne as presiding *Prince of Darkness*.

As I did so I smiled - a very sharp and toothsome smile - 'cos we all *know The Guv'nor* would eat *them* alive.

RADIO GA-GA

Foremost amongst my nascent talents, as a mewling quot, was a prodigious skill in projectile vomiting. I'd gurgle cutely in my crib, and every kindly old auntie within a ten mile radius would feel an immediate desire to lift me up and dandle me dotingly on their knee - at which point I would make Linda Blair look like an under-achiever - decorating my environs with what looked like a mid-green Artex. Music could calm my savage spleen, but not for long, and the TV distracted me - but kept me from much needed napping. What really becalmed my bile-duct was *talk*. I loved listening.

Thus, was I introduced to Radio Four. I was left cooing contentedly to *Womans' Hour* or whatever auditory offerings availed themselves of my ickle earholes. My guts would only vent when the aforementioned aunties would interrupt my romper-clad revels, and...*well...*you get the idea...



The pictures are always better on radio!

At school, my friends' radio-waves were awash with a tawdry tide of pop or country - Radio One or the Glasgow station, Radio Clyde (a station so crap it even gave Sydney Devine a show, and if you've never heard of '*Steak and Kidney*', thank the Gods and all their little pixies for their tender mercies!) were the stations of choice for most of my pre-pubescent peers. I would wax loquacious about some crime or sci-fi serial I'd heard. They, in turn, would stare at me like a pigeon that had just collided with a bus.

Through Radio Four I was introduced to Wyndham, through BBC serials based on *The Midwich Cuckoos* and *Day of the Triffids*; to James, Bradbury and many fine fantasy writers, thanks to re-runs of anthology series like *The Man In Black*, with Valentine Dyall

as the eponymous host and the delightfully arch *The Price of Fear*, with the blessed Vincent, and I fondly recall listening to adaptations of Loren B. Estelman's *Sherlock Holmes Versus Dracula* and C.P. Snow's *A Coat of Varnish*, on my battery-powered Alba, during bleak winter powercuts, shivering on the sofa, huddled under my duvet as darkness dawned.

And, you know, it *may* be a cliché, but the pictures *are* better on radio. The 1984 TV version of Douglas Adams' *The Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* - which sounded utterly unlike anything else on radio - was fun, but couldn't possibly match the images my boyhood imagination had summoned up, listening to those original broadcasts, back in 1979. Jackson captured the energy and epic sprawl of *Lord of the Rings*, but my *Strider* will always be Robert Stephens - a far darker, grimmer heir to *Isildur* than Mr Mortensen.

At university I picked up a couple of scratchy LPs of Orson Welles as *The Shadow* - shows dating from the late '30s. Fabulous stuff, indeed - possessed of more *ham* than a Pork Bellies dealership, but possessed of the edge-of-the seat energy that only that live performance brings. This awakened an interest in classic US radio dramas - an art-form in which our Colonial Cousins *excelled* during the Golden Age of wireless broadcasting. I found the infamous Mercury Theatre of the Air *War of the Worlds* broadcast which made Halloween 1938 so frightful for so many Americans - terrified that the mock-reportage of alien invasion in New Jersey (they'd fit right in) was genuine. Welles was so popular on live radio that he often had to speed across New York performing his *Shadow* and *Mercury* shows on different networks.

I moved on to reel-to-reel recordings of *Suspense Theatre*, Vincent Price (again...Yay!) as a jokey, hokey incarnation of Charteris's *The Saint*, US/British co-productions like *Tales of the Black Museum* and *The Lives of Harry Lime* (a remarkable chap, that *Third Man*: fatally shot in the title credits...he still managed fifty-two weekly adventures), with Orson Welles, and Guilgud and Richardson (with Big Orson as Moriarty) over-acting their knightly little noggins off in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

Personal favourites include *The Adventures of Superman* (1940-1951), which introduced such canonical comic regulars as *Kryptonite* and *Jimmy Olsen*, brought *Batman and Robin* to the airwaves, and revealed that *Clark Kent* started the day with a refreshing bowl of *Kellogs Pep* (can you guess who sponsored the show?) - and *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. *Dr Watson* encouraging listeners to buy *War Bonds*, in between the earnest host's increasingly odd entreaties that they sample *Petrie Wine* - '*Does Holmes like chicken, Doctor? Then he'll love Petrie's California Sauterne...*' - takes some getting used to.

It's a shame, I think, that it's only recently that effort has been put into making groundbreaking British serials like *Journey Into Space* and *Earthsearch* available to modern audiences - largely due to their popularity on the retro BBC 7 digital station.

Much of the best BBC was lost - the BBC having purged them as recently as the '80s. Auntie has a far better record in restoring and releasing comedies like *Round The Horne*, *Hancock's Half Hour* and *The Navy Lark* - great shows, admittedly, and I have many of them in my collection - but so much energy and imagination was squandered. For all the technical improvements in sound-design, the classics still have the edge over much of the current fare. People work better by the skin of their teeth.

I'm *still* a regular listener to Radio Four, and to BBC 7 - where I'm continually surprised that I'm familiar with the punch-lines and catch-phrases of characters and shows that I have no knowledge of encountering before. My first *bona* encounter with *Julian and Sandy* prompted a feeling of immediate familiarity. I can only imagine that listening to late '60s broadcasts of these shows in my crib they have become oddly *hot-wired* into my subconscious.

It's not often I feel inclined to quote Her Majesty, but more than forty years after it was my infant-comforter, I'm still '*Radio Ga-Ga*'!

PORN AGAIN

I've had some weird gigs, over twenty years of thesping. I've had to learn all the music and dance cues for 'Oliver' in an afternoon - while the company manager picked a pocket (or two) to bail his regular Fagin out of the local nick. I've had to be a Midget Wrangler on a Panto, when the Seven Dwarves 'Heigh Ho'd' their way into Pokey. I've been shot, while Ghostwalking (bloody critics!), and almost tazered by MI5 (a long story, involving the Princess Royal, a replica musket and a grassy knoll). I've been sworn at by *Rab C. Nesbitt*, , and clung on for dear life to the ramparts of Glamis at two in the morning, gale-force winds buffering my codpiece, while a coked-up American director chuckled cryptically at mysteries more Colombian than Caledonian..



Nuff said!

Film, telly, radio, theatre...a friend recently pointed out that there was only one area of the entertainment industry I hadn't worked in....*Porn*.

Except I *did*. Well, *almost*...

Thank God and His Little Pixies for that 'almost', folks. Though I *have* been naked on stage, this weary waking world of ours is not yet ready for the sight of The Hangman's perilously unpulchritudinous posterior provocatively bobbing on it's plasma screens, humming '*Another opening, another show...*' between the grunts and gurning. A certain fondness for Benny Goodman's oeuvre aside, the only thing about me that *swings* is my noose..

I have no inclination to toggle my tadger at the camera. I've played a *Common Pricker* (that's a Scottish Witch-Finder...you smutty imps!), once or twice, but no other kind. I have nothing fundamentally *against* porn (as it were). I know a good many actors and actresses who have worked as strippers or dancers simply to get the professional points required to acquire an *Equity Card*. A girl I performed with in theatre when I first went Pro, ran her own video company in the early Naughties making lesbian flicks - prodigiously profiting from her recreational rooting and tooting.

I just don't *get* it...and I don't just mean the rooting and tooting.

I have, I'm sure, as many lusts as the next Hangman, but the '*Oooh, baby...right there!*' School of Performing Arts has never beckoned...even at my most *deprived*. My own imagination tends to serve me better than the air-brushed bleached-blond plastic pleasuredomes proffered by top shelf publications. For the frustrated watching others rutting, gumming, frotting and fumbling is akin to subjecting a famine victim to the latest *MacDonalds* ad (though forcing them to *eat* there could conceivably constitute a far greater cruelty). Basically, if I'm not *involved*, I'm not *interested*. All sex on television achieves is the prospect of the remote control getting unexpectedly lodged in an unfortunate orifice.

I'm not saying it doesn't require skill. The effective artifice of sensuality takes genuine effort - particularly given the curious carnal (and sometimes downright unsanitary) working conditions these artistes often endure, proves that they *can* be excellent actors. Martin Scorsese, supposedly wanted porn actress Ginger Lynn for the *Casino* (1995) role which ultimately (after studio interference) went to Sharon Stone. Nor would I think to stand in lofty moral judgement over porny peeps: *I* get paid for playing '*Let's Pretend*', too.

The Porn Industry and mainstream entertainment media, are not greatly different: the Big Fish make the Big Bucks, and the Little Fish get gobbled up (*gobbling* is *involved*, certainly). Both are superficial and exploitative, the Porn side possibly a little more openly so, and there are as many fuck-ups (literal and metaphorical) and burn-outs in both.

The fandom is increasingly similar, too. My friend hasn't been filmed or photographed professionally in seven years - yet is *constantly* asked to attend US conventions - where thousands of fans, united only by their onanistic adorations, line up to meet and greet the objects of their lusts. Where once the *Sound of One Hand Clapping* marked their solitary meditations as private - or perceived as *shameful* - their own particular geekdoms have now taken on the trappings of *other* conventioners. Britain isn't quite so bold. My chum gets recognised as much over here as she does in America, it's just those who clock her here at home are too embarrassed to *admit* it...odd, given Britain's media venerations of soft-core *Page Three* girls, Joanne Guest and her airbrushed ilk.

The fan-mail verges from the reverential (writers often including lovingly rendered paintings, drawings or pictures of their 'shrines' to their venerated vixens) to the downright weird (with...*um*... rather *different* kinds of photograph). Mind you, I'm told that my Hobbit friend, young Master Boyd, gets as much pervy post popped through his box as my porny pal ever did.

She was quite happy to leave that part of her work behind her. She worked in her own terms, when and with whom she wanted - and stopped when, in demand, agents and distributors put increasing pressure on her to increase her output, work with people she didn't like, and do things she *really* didn't want to do. Pretty much the same reasons she stopped working in 'straight' theatre, in fact.

Anyway, I hear you ask, *how is it* that The Hangman was *almost* in a porn film...?

Not much of a tale, really, I visited my chum, in Brighton, a few years back. We were supposed to have lunch and pop along to see a screening of *The Ladykillers* (1955) at a wee retro-cinema I'm rather fond of...but she found that she had to work. Rain had stopped (fore)play the previous day, and a beachfront scene required her attention. The shoot required the presence of an old man sleeping on a deck-chair, oblivious of the seductive Sapphic shenanigans going on around him, but the decrepit dodderer hadn't turned up. Would I consider it?

No. Not for a second. I really had no inclination to see (or hear) my friend getting down and dirty on the stony shoreline.

Mind you, it would have been an intriguingly odd addition to my CV...

GOLDEN GIRL

Have you made the acquaintance of *Mr Wesley Bernard Dodds*? I wasn't impressed when our paths first crossed, during one of many '70s set-tos 'twixt the *Justice League of America* and their alternate-reality counterparts, the *Justice Society*. The purple cloak, orange fedora and gasmask combo *really* didn't work for me...and what use is a bloody sleeping-gas gun against an intergalactic, interdimensional menace? He grew on me, though, particularly when re-introduced by Messrs Matt Wagner and Steven. T. Seagle.

One of comics' first '*Mystery Men*' - pre-dated in DC's annals only by *The Crimson Avenger* - the 1939 creation of Gardner Fox and Bert Christman bore more than a passing resemblance to Walter Gibson's hugely successful *The Shadow*. He prowled the city streets in slouch hat and cloak, but relied on the soporific fug of his Gas-Gun, rather than psychic ability, to '*cloud mens' minds*'. He also imitated the *eminence grise* of the cape-wearing set's infamous '*Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of Men?...The Shadow knows!*', on his calling-card –

*'There is no land beyond the law
Where tyrants rule with unshakable power!
'Tis but a dream from which the evil wake
To face their fate, their terrifying hour!"*

- but give the boy a break - he's a Cape, not Coleridge! He *even* had a faithful retainer (Is there a training school for these guys?) to iron his cape and patch him up when he was shot, stabbed, or otherwise came a cropper – as he often did. This touch of mortality indicated a debt to the *other* Pulps – the crime tales of Hammett and his ilk (but we'll come back to him, later). My interest in Mr Dodds grew with my fascination with the Pulps that spawned him.

Launched at the heyday of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, *Sandman Mystery Theatre* (1993-1998) lovingly rendered a bona-fide Golden Age *Mystery Man*, though a distinctively contemporary eye – unapologetically focused (like the best of Ellroy's novels) on period prejudices and peccadilloes. *Mystery Theatre* gave us all the '*grim-'n'-gritty*' a '90s readership could crave, but remained surprisingly loyal to source - indeed the only *significant* alteration of Wesley's character came in his being spared that cliché of the comic-book crimefighter, '*playboy-millionaire*' persona, and the prophetic dreams which spurred on his mask-wearing nocturnal exploits. Dodds's dreams provided the sole connection - never fully explained, thankfully, with Gaiman's creation, so the link was never a narrative bind (save for the one-shot *Sandman Midnight Theatre*, no knowledge of *Morpheus* was required to understand the title, even when variations of Gaiman creations - notably *The Corinthian* – cropped up). Wagner and Co., also improved Wes's wardrobe - opting for moody browns and olives, and ditching the purple cloak – and fostered fanboy '*Squee!*'s a-plenty through frequent Golden Age cameos.

But Wesley's greatest asset was always *Dian*.

Dian Belmont, that is: free-thinking debutante and DA's daughter of DA.

Now, heroes have *always* had girlfriends. Some, like *Guinevere* and *Lois Lane* are more trouble than they were worth - fickle frails serving no function other than to provide their suitor with a reason to get shot at, thumped or otherwise placed in peril (*Lois* improved...after *forty years!*). Others, *The Shadow's* sometime gal-pal *Margot Lane* (no relation), for example, helped out at the hero-ing, from time to time - but usually as a foil to show just how daring, dashing or devilishly clever the costumed careerist they were hanging around with was.

Oh, *Dian* was snatched from the jaws of danger by her brave and blusterous beau more than once, but returned the favour at least as often. The influence of Hammett's *Nick and Nora Charles* from *The Thin Man* (1934) is clear. *Wes* may not be as hard-boiled or cocky as *Nick*, and *Dian* lacks *Nora's* alarming Alcohol/Martin-Count, but they are very much a team. In *Sandman Mystery Theatre* *Dian's* flighty forthright nature is set in sharp contrast with the lonely *Wesley*: she connects the lonely financier to the real world, and he gives the gadabout purpose.



Ms Belmont & her beau

(c) DC Comics

'80s retcon - *All-Star Squadron* #18 = place the bond between them as the reason for *Wesley* abandoning his Gasmask-and-Fedora combo in favour of the more superheroic '40s yellow-and-purple union-suit foisted on him by artist Paul Norris, in 1941: *Dian* took on the mantle of *The Sandman*, and died when he was overseas fighting in WW2, leaving the returning *Dodds* reluctant to garb himself in his tragically redolent gasmasked attire - fighting crime, instead, with *Dian's* nephew *Sandy 'The Golden Boy' Hawkins*. *Mystery Theatre*, set *before* these oft-altered events, has *Dian* herself adopting a mask and taking the side-kick role on several occasions - though she was too independent to play second fiddle for long.

Sharp, emotionally aware, socially conscious and liberal, *Dian* was a '30s 'New Woman' - a boon for a writer looking at issues of race, abortion, gender-politics, etc., from a *contemporary* perspective. In *Post-Crisis* continuity she was revealed *not* to have perished, thankfully, but to be contentedly sharing her retirement with *Wesley*. Her

death, as revealed in James Robinson's *Starman*, was genuinely upsetting - even those whose only encounter with her was in that title's 'Sand and Stars' arc. The elderly Pulitzer Prize winning authoress was still very much her own woman. The scenes between the aged lovers in the (otherwise underwhelming) 2007 mini-series *Sleep of Reason* were more touching and effective than the exploits of it's new *Sandman* could ever *dream* (no pun intended) of being. Without her *Wesley* declined. He sacrificed himself in a clifftop confrontation with the evil *Mordru*, signaling the rebirth of the most recent incarnation of the *Justice Society* (*JSA: Secret Files & Origins*#1), leaping to his end, eyes shut, a smile upon his face...and you just *know* who he was thinking of.

Dian Belmont is a rare beast in comics, a supporting character who *mattered*, and was not entirely defined by the protagonist, and, rather, defined *him*. We saw her live, love, and grow old disgracefully (they never married), and she was always - as Mr Robinson's *Starman*, *Jack Knight*, so rightly said, 'a classy lady'.

MODESTY IS A VIRTUE

One dusty day in 1942 four Royal Signals Corps squaddies were settling down to a tinned lunch of McConnochie's Vegetable Stew, smoking, and shooting the breeze as they basked in the mid-day heat of the Persian sun. They had nothing else to shoot at, expected German encroachments from the Caucasus to the Middle Eastern oil-fields never materialised. Instead they encountered a sorry stream of Balkan refugees, pushed out of their homelands as the Nazis advanced into Russian territory.

Most came in clusters: family groups, whole villages sometimes - attempting to sustain some semblance of community, sharing serendipity and sorrow as they plodded their way into the comparative safety of British Persian territory.

It was rare that the soldiers took more than a fleeting notice of this mass of homogenous humanity, but on this particular day one caught their eye: a little girl – perhaps nine or ten years old, but small for her age, and with more distinctly Eurasian features than the others. She stood, still, silent and solitary upon the open road, staring at them...not with fear, though, but with the cautious circumspection of a seasoned soldier evaluating an obstacle.



The Princess

One of the squaddies advanced, offering the child food. She stepped back, warily, but did not run away. A billy-can of stew was placed on a nearby rock and the soldier returned to his friends. The child approached, eat heartily, then – much to the surprise of her audience – cleaned the container in the sand, and returned it to them. A small consideration, but not one the soldiers expected of the desperate travellers they encountered – and certainly not from some wayward waif. She bowed her head in thanks, and made to leave. One of the men called out, offering a gift of several more cans of stew (and, helpfully, a tin-opener). He had earlier noticed what he had presumed to be a pendant – a piece of childish jewellery – around her neck. On closer inspection he saw it to be a long sharp nail, bound with wire to a palm-sized wooden rod – a weapon, always within easy reach. She nodded in thanks and gave what one of the soldiers later described as a smile that *'could've lit up a small village'*, and went on her way *'like a princess...on brave skinny legs'*.

This determined traveller made quite an impression on her new friends. One, a Lewisham lad named Peter O'Donnell, later used her as the inspiration for his most famous creation.

Modesty Blaise.

Ah, *Modesty*. I first encountered this freewheeling adventuress anti-heroine (and her cheeky-chappie Cockney side-kick, *Willie Garvin*) courtesy of scrap books, collected by an old neighbour – clipped from '60s copies of the *Daily Express*. *'The Galley Slaves'* and *'Bad Suki'* were, I think, the first tales I read. I've always loved strip serials – a much underrated art-form, where each three or four panel sequence has to serve as a self-contained daily dose of peppily paced adventure, while still advancing plot and character – and O'Donnell delivered the goods.

Modesty, the former mastermind of *The Network*, a criminal organisation which avoided vice, protection rackets and other forms of exploitation, is retired and independently wealthy – 26 years old at the time of her first tale, 1963's *'La Machine'*. It's easy to see the soldiers' little *'princess'* in Jim Holdaway's illustrations: confident, self-possessed, and dangerous to anyone foolish enough to underestimate her – she even employs a *Kongo* (or *Yawara Stick*), a weapon not wildly removed from that fashioned by the tiny traveller. Approached by British Intelligence, eager to use her unique skill-set: *'Nobody uses me...I decided that in a refugee camp when I was twelve.'*

And that is pretty much *all* you need to know about Ms *Modesty Blaise*. Oh, we learn a *little* more– that she was tutored by another wartime refugee, a Hungarian academic, as a teenager, that she and Willie are *'friends...never lovers'*, and that her past includes horrors so great that she has blocked them from her memory – but in an astonishing *thirty-nine* years of newsprint and thirteen novels – *all* written by O'Donnell, graphic reprints in Sweden (*Agent X9* magazine, which *still* reprints original tales), India (*Lion Magazine*), and elsewhere.

Oddly, one of the few places she has *not* made a mark is America, where – in the '60s, at least - a self-assured, occasionally amoral Eurasian, feminine and sexy but *utterly* resistant to objectification – was a little too much for Middle-America to take. Her 1966 screen outing – with Monica Vitti as a very blonde *Blaise* (a far cry from O'Donnell's exotic outsider) and Terrence Stamp as *Garvin*) was camp crap, notable only for the peculiar vision of a blondly bewigged Dirk Bogarde as evil genius, *Gabriel*. A TV pilot in 1982 was cursed by a bubble-permed Ann Turkel (Mrs Richard Harris), a woefully wimpy *Willie* in Lewis Van Birkel, and the *inevitable* relocation of action from Europe to Hollywood. DC Comics' 1994 attempt to adapt O'Donnell's first prose tale as a graphic novel was better – Dick Giordano's art bringing to mind that of his late-'60s de-powered *Wonder Woman*, itself largely inspired by Ms *Blaise* – but many, unaware of her origins, assumed that this Euro-babe superspy was a knock-off of Marvel's *Black Widow*. The *opposite* would be rather more accurate.

More satisfying was 2002's (terribly titled) *Quentin Tarantino Presents My Name Is Modesty: A Modesty Blaise Adventure* (Quentin is a *big* fan, apparently – Travolta is reading a copy of a *Modesty* collection in 1994's *Pulp Fiction*), set just before *Blaise* takes the reins of *The Network*, and featuring flashbacks to her origins. Alexandra Staden made a suitably centred and exotic (if lightweight) lead, but by then the idea of a kick-ass action-babe was...well... *commonplace*

A shame - as it's unlikely that the recent trend for such heroines would have evolved *without* *Modesty*. *Sydney Bristow*, *Lara Croft*, *Echo*, *Painkiller Jane*...all owe a huge debt to a lonely little girl on a dusty Persian road.

I hope *her* story was as entertaining, but have no doubt that she shaped her *own* destiny.

THE SANTA CHRONICLES Part 1

Boyz In The Ho-Ho-Hood

For the next couple of columns, kiddies, I'll be concerning myself with an area of rather more widespread enthusiasm than most aspects of geekdom I've touched on over the past thirty-odd weeks: one most of us have shared at one time or another.

Santa

Nice chap. Jolly, even. I've spent the best part of a decade-and-a-half *Behind The Beard*, impersonating him, and recruiting and training others to do likewise at sites throughout the land.

I've encountered all manner of munters and mediocrities who think that all they have to do to fill those furry-topped willies is faff around in flurry of facial foliage and a fat-suit offering festive felicities asking oiks what they want for Christmas. 'Course I've met many 'proper' actors who think such work *beneath* them. Last year I endured a lecture from a

performer in a prominent repertory Pantomime (sorry, '*Christmas Show*' – he wouldn't sully his thespic soul with anything so *mundane* as Panto) on the topic of this trade. It wasn't *really* acting - *any* fool could do it, after all. It was the domain of the *also rans*. I took particular pleasure in pointing out to the arsewipe in question that at I was being paid well in excess of the Equity Minimum rate he was on.



Baaaaad Santa!

He was right on *one* detail. Any fool *could* do the job...*badly*. The same can be said of street-sweeping and surgery: each demands a very specific skill-set without which it's practitioners are of no sodding use to man nor beast. It's a job – a role – as challenging as any I've encountered in twenty years of professional performance.

It requires discipline. Each child has it's own specific expectations as to who (and what) Santa is. If Little Tommy, swinging from the decorations in a merry miasma of youthful adrenaline and Sunny D, expects a jolly, bouncy, avuncular *Kris Kringle*, then that's what you *must* to be. If Wee Suzie, cacking herself at the prospect of entering *The Presence*, requires a softer, gentler, more assuring Santa, then he must manifest. The point is, a good Santa – a *really* good Santa – has to be capable of that kind of constant re-invention, child after child, day after day.

That adaptability also serves Santa well when dealing with drunks, chancers, evil grannies, teenage tossers, stick-up-artists, fire-drills and bomb-alerts – and I've had to deal first-hand with all of those over the years. Once, noticing that a seedy chap photographing children waiting to enter the Grotto, I opted to creep up beside him – just as an Elf popped out and snapped us, arm in arm. What a *lovely* photo, I quietly chucked (popping the memory card from his camera) - *nice and clear*...and shortly to be e-mailed to the local cop-shop if he didn't leg it, *sharpish*.

Ho ho ho.

Santa also has to '*know his Onions*': to have a mass of Santa Facts and Fables at his finger-tips Where do I live? What are the names of all nine reindeer? (how many can you remember...and no, there *isn't* one called *Dixon*, and *Robbie the Reindeer* doesn't bloody count) How old am I...and am I 'Baby Jesus's Daddy'? (with the big white beard it's an easy mistake to make) Why does a Saint of the stern and serious Greek Orthodox Church get to hang around with pagan Pixies, Elves and the like? (I have a very good PR agent in the personage of the esteemed Rev. Moore) How do I get 'round the world in one night? Do *Coca-Cola* really own the copyright on my red-and-white suit? (no they sodding well don't...!)

Don't take Him for granted. I *never* promise to bring *anything*: lists are 'suggestions': I ask what kind of toys they *like*, not what they *want*. I'm often stern with naughty brats: piss me off and I'll shit down your chimney.

Santa needs a heart of gold...and 'nads of steel – as evil grannies, intent on getting a photo of their progeny at *any* cost, hurl anguished infants in the direction of his lap. He needs the saintly patience to endure all the indignities which excitable oik orifices can ooze, spill, spurt or spew upon him.

Ah, the cynics cheer, like a horde of cheerless Dawkinses - he's a *lie*. Yeah? So's *Hamlet*. So's *Parliamentary Democracy*. Difference is people are *glad to see* Santa, who has a palpable power the doggedly dreary *Great Dane* doesn't.

I have several regular adult visitors. One – a middle aged, scruffy and rather too fond of the bottle than he perhaps should be – visited me every Christmas Eve for many years. He'd chat courteously, select a gift for a two year old boy...then quietly cry his heart out for a few minutes. Just him and Santa. Who else would understand? The parents of an autistic lad were equally tearful as their bonny boy decided the time was right to connect with the Big Guy. A glorious little girl queued for two hours on the busiest day of the year, because her bedridden best friend was unable to deliver her Letter to the Grotto in person. Lost kids gravitate there because they *know* He will help them. Another poor lassie, terminally ill, and about to enter hospital for what was expected to be the last time, came to see me because her concerns were not steeped in shit, blood, pain and the imminence of death...but in fears that if she wasn't at home on Christmas Eve Santa might forget her.

He never will.

Look into the eyes of a little girl with fuck all in this world to look forward to but a desperate, dismal death, and see the spark of joy – of a genuine, precious and utterly unconditional love – that the idea of a fat man in a nylon beard can flicker into life....*then* tell me Santa's not real.

What a good Santa really needs is *perspective* – the understanding that he's only borrowed those magic wellies. Ol' Ben Parker was right on the money about that '*great power*' thing.

THE SANTA CHRONICLES Part 2

Oh Come All Ye Frightful

Aside from the presence of Elves, flying reindeer and other fantastical fancies, Santa's Grotto has all manner of peculiar genre-based inhabitants and Strange Visitors. Here are a few...

First and foremost there is *The Terminator*. Relentless in pursuit of it's given goal, devoid of even vaguest vestiges of compassion or humanity, and destined to brutally lay waste to all who oppose them in their evil endeavours...grannies are Santa's arch-enemies. They exist to fulfil one function – to gain a photograph of their unfortunate progeny. That the infant in question may be utterly (and understandably) terrified at the prospect of being thrust upon the lap of what is, essentially, a Yeti in an artfully decorated shed will *not* deter them. Santa calling for mercy as the flailing quot's feet stomp the contents of his (ahem) sack into the consistency of Tesco's Economy Brand Brussels Pate signifies naught. They *will* have their photo, no matter the trauma inflicted upon those who impede their onslaught. I have been known to expel Grannies from my various grottoes for being pushy or obnoxious. Yes, they *do* know the children better than I do, and in whichever dire domain they offer sacrifice to Moloch I will happily defer to their greater wisdom and understanding - on *my* turf...*well*...they are Grannies, I'm a ***ing Saint – I *outrank* them.



EVIL!!

Then comes *Shatner*. Picture the scene. A toddler toddles (well, it would, wouldn't it) t'ward Santa, it's attention absorbed by twinkling lights, festive colours, the seasonal array of all things bright and beautiful, it's little limbs lolling joyfully...then it catches sight of The Yeti-Man on the big throne, dead ahead. Like *James T. Kirk*, suddenly stricken by some awful alien mind control device, it's muscles tense. It freezes. It's facial features fix

in a rictus grimace...it's eyes silently screaming "Spock/Mum! What's..happening to...me?"

This is, of course, a common occurrence, caused chiefly by the Grottoes being constructed to appeal to adults, who will appreciate the big '*Ta-daaaah!*' moment where the enthroned Santa – The Presence, as I like to think of Him – is discovered, like some Ancient Seer in a Rider-Haggard novella. For youngsters who have only the most tenuous grasp of what Santa is and does (ancient, bearded, magical, knows when you've been bad or good, is always watching, punishes the naughty and rewards the virtuous – *God*, basically), most Grottoes are *Houses of Horror*. In one, a few years back, I insisted that the designers remove a massive ornate throne on which Santa was to greet the Faithful. Why? It looked *great!!* I asked the manager of the shopping centre to kneel before me, at approximately the height of my average visitor...then loured over her in welcome, my arms on the great golden lion-head arm-rests. "Hello, little girl!" I said. "*Sweet Jesus!*", she replied...and asked the designers to give me the lower, more welcoming *chaise longue* I had asked for.

Then comes Damien – the Devil Child This is the weirdest of weird kids ("I want a big knife. My Daddy has lots of knives. They're sharp! That's what I want. I want a big knife."), who simply repeats the same monotone mantra in response to any and all queries.

"Have you been a good boy?"

"No. *I want a big knife!*"

"Really...um...and have you been working hard at school?"

"No. *I want a big knife!*"

"And have you been helping Mummy with the shopping, today, or do you just..."

"No. *I want a big knife!*"

"Yeeeeees...I *thought* you might!"

"You gonnae give me a big knife, Santa?"

"Um...*no!* How about a football...?"

"Grrrrrrrrr...!!!!"

These are *not* the kids to ask to '*leave a little something for Rudolph*'...as the '*something*' in question will almost certainly be a bear-trap...or at the very least something guaranteed to offend the WWF. These '*hairy weans*' (as my WeeGee forbears would term 'em) are related to *The Walking Dead*, those children who lumber in and out of the Grotto, oblivious of purpose or direction – requiring to be pointed in the general direction of Santa, the camera, the present offered and, ultimately, the exit. *Damien* at least has some opaque sense of purpose. In terms of Grotto-based banter *The 'Dead* make him look like Stephen frickin' Fry.

Yoda talks ("Presents, I have. Under my tree, they are!") as does *Gollum* ("Buzz Lightyear – I *wants* it. Give it to me, Santa! *Naaaasty* Elveses took my Buzz Lightyear!, and there's no shutting C-3PO up ("Santa! I know the names of all your reindeer, Santa! There's Dasher and Dancer, Santa...Dancer's Rudolph's Mummy, Santa...I'm I'm fluent

in the language of *Moisture* ‘Vaporators!’). And there are many little *Anakins*, seemingly saintly, but who you *know* in your heart will yield to the *Dark Side* long before Boxing Day.

Finally, in a fetid fug of fear, comes *The Swamp Thing*. Many of Santa’s little visitors, faced with the larger, stronger, stranger beast of predation – the aforementioned Yeti with the sack – will flee. Some, will do so because fearing entrapment: if He asks if they have been good, is it actually a trick question? Does he know the nascent evil that lurks in their ickle hearts? Others will manifest that other trait of our ancestors’ ‘*fight or flight*’ mechanism...and simply shit themselves...at which point their Mums (or, more likely, their bloody Grannies!) will plonk them on Santa’s lap. Many bemoan that this lappage is discouraged, in our era of greater sensitivity to the possibility of abuse. I, on the other hand, gripe that so many are still intent on plonking their progeny upon me – as the unmistakable, warm, seeping, stinking sensation of the recently filled romper moulding itself to my knee is something this Santa could happily live without. *The Swamp-Thing* is a near relation to *The Toxic Avenger* – that rare beast, the child that smells of something not quite right: a pungent aroma not naturally borne of any living thing, the oleaginous odour of which will linger for hours afterwards, taking the shine off Santa’s boots.

Welcome to the Grotto. The Greatest Festive Freakshow On Earth!

THE SANTA CHRONICLES Part 3 ***Mystery Man***

So, who *is* he, this Santa Claus geezer?

The jolly red-faced imp of lore, serial housebreaker and cohort of Elves, Fairies and Reindeer, has very little in common with Nikolas of Patara (270-346 AD), Bishop of Myra and Saint of the Greek Orthodox Church.

‘*The Wonderworker*’- great nickname - was a generous soul, giving anonymous gifts (the original ‘*Secret Santa*’ - though how the ‘*secret*’ became common knowledge I’m not sure), and his gift of three golden coins to a trio of virtuous virgins, allowing them to buy their freedom from their nasty old Dad, intent on selling them into a life of shame, made him the Patron Saint of Prostitutes and Pawn-brokers (his gift recalled on his Icons, and on the Pawn-Broker’s logo). Gifts to the poor and needy – children particularly (he having miraculously re-animated butchered apprentices, murdered by a cannibalistic merchant) – were often given on his Feast Day, 6th December. He also holds sway over Sailors and Children In Distress.

Nicholas is a scrawny, pious chap, though – though as the Dutch *Sinterklaas* he does, occasionally, sport a fine white beard. As, indeed, does *Father Christmas* – who has bugger all to do with St Nicholas. Or, indeed, *Christmas*.

The Church doesn't *do* Elves. *Father Christmas* does - a Christianised echo of the Saxon *Wudwusa*, or the Celtic *Green Man* – our variant of the Norse *Odin* (or *Wotan*).



A New Look for the Grotto!

At the year's end the one-eyed *All-Father* of the Gods would crucify himself upon *Ygdrasil*, the *World-Tree* (big tree, surrounded by stars...sound familiar?), that his blessed blood might replenish the barren, winter earth. For twelve days and nights his followers would eat, drink and...well...*shag* their brains out in celebration of the bounty the God's gift would bring and – *surprise, surprise* – after those twelve days the sun would shine just a wee bit longer and the grass grow greener. The whole thing was very practical: a good layer of fat would be added to the revellers to guard against the cold, womenfolk would fall pregnant – but still be fit and able to work the harvest – and it was a great excuse for a piss-up.

Odin was very popular, and the nascent Christian churches found it very difficult to stamp him out. In the end his *Festival of Yule* – which began on 25th December – was appropriated, and *Yuletide* became the '*Twelve Days of Christmas*'. You'll find the *Green Man* engraved on many old churches and gravestones – some in the Holy Rude churchyard, where I lead my GhostWalks, from as recent a vintage as the 1820s – as the notion of the 'resurrected God' links in with other Christian festivals and beliefs. You may have encountered this verdant chap in the 14th-century *Gawain and the Green*

Knight, or in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) – as the wild-man *Ghost of Christmas Present*, living in (and for) the moment....and dressed in fur, and green.

All good little boys and girls should be a-bed, snuggled to their pillows, as the sleigh-bells tinkle by, 'cos if they don't...well...as folklorist Kveldulf Gundarsson wrote (*Mountain Thunder* #7, 1992) –

"When the winter winds blow and the Yule fires are lit, it is best to stay indoors...Those who wander out by themselves during the Yule-nights may hear a sudden rustling through the tops of the trees - a rustling that might be the wind, though the rest of the wood is still. But then the barking of dogs fills the air, and the host of wild souls sweeps down, fire flashing from the eyes of the black hounds and the hooves of the black horses"

Welcome, lads and lasses to *Wilde Jagd*, *Wildes Heer*, *Herlapping*, *Cwn Annwn*, *Herne's Night*, *Cain's Hunt* – one of the most pervasive traditions of European mythologies - *The Wild Hunt*. On that night the dead, often accompanied by spirits, demons or faery would ride in search of sinful souls, led (depending on the area) by mythic heroes (*Valdemar IV*, in Denmark; *King Arthur* in Brittany) or Gods – *Odin* (yup, *him* again) being the most common. 'Course he didn't have a nifty sleigh – preferring to hunt astride his eight-legged steed, *Sleipnir*, or in a chariot drawn by his hell-hounds. To look upon his hunt was really not wise, as one's spirit could be consumed by the hounds, or, at best forced to join the pack. The Germanic *Holda* – a thinly disguised *Frigg* (that's *Mrs Odin*, to you) – also leads the Hunt within Christianised Europe. A rather kindlier figure than her old man, she's still best avoided – as she doesn't just pick on the sinners, but on unbaptised babies, too.

They *know* when you've been bad or good...so be good for goodness sake. *Damn right*.

Some traditions have the leader of *The Hunt* pursuing a white buck, skinning it and wearing it's hide, turned inside out - red with white trim (**** you, Coca-Cola!), and those worshipful pagans enacting the ritual of *The Hunt* often partook of the hallucinogen *Fly Agaric* (reindeer go nuts for the stuff!) before retreating to their ceremonial *Yurt* to meditate.

Santa's Grotto is a pagan drug den! *Odin* would be so proud.

So where does that leave us? Who *is* this *Claus* geezer?

Santa Claus, as we know him, makes his first *public* appearance in New York, on 25th December 1823. Clement Clark Moore's *A Visit From St. Nicholas* - better known as *The Night Before Christmas* – appeared in the *Troy Sentinel*, and contained all the elements we now associate with *Santa* – Elves, gifts, the jolly demeanour and white beard, the livestock and pre-Freudian chimney fetishism...drawn from the Greek, Russian, English, Germanic and sundry other seasonal traditions then taking root in the ripening Big Apple.

Notice I said this was his first 'public' appearance - neighbours of another Troy citizen, Henry Livingstone, claimed that he wrote the verse in 1808, to amuse local children, so the Rev. Moore might be on the '*Naughty List*'.

As always, Santa's origins are *uncertain*....but it does seem that as a Santa (monocular – like Odin) I'm 'playing God'. Somehow that appeals to my Ego.

THE SANTA CHRONICLES Part 4 ***Secret Santa***

Each Christmas Eve I meet up with *Mr George Bailey* of *Bedford Falls*. He and I have been seasonal chums for far longer than I can remember, and prior to going *behind-the-beard* on my last day as Santa, I make sure to wish him well. He's no angel, our *George*: he's as capable of bitterness and envy as the rest of us, of course, and with good cause...poor sod has been stuck in the family business for what seems like decades, while his whiz-kid-brother and best friend get all the glory. Still, I always feel better after seeing him



Every time you hear a bell ring...I need a hankie!

(c) 1946 RKO Radio Pictures

Frank Kapra's 1946 *It's A Wonderful Life* has long been a key part of my Christmas routine. Often derided as an outmoded morality tale, perpetuating the outdated mythic ideal of down-home Middle-Americana, it's actually anything *but*. *George's* world is not *that* far removed from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*: the poor will *stay* poor, the grasping *Mr Potter* will remain undiscovered and unpunished in his attempts to sink the *Bailey Bros. Savings and Loan*, flirty *Violet* will *continue* to get herself into trouble, and even if George isn't punished for the (ahem!) 'irregularities' in *B&B's* accounting, he'll be stuck at in a job he *hates* for the rest of his life. Original audiences were all too familiar with the dismal scenes of citizens rushing to clear their accounts in the wake of the Wall Street

Crash. It's a desperately dark piece of social commentary, thinly disguised as a comic fantasy – comparable, I think, to *A Christmas Carol* - the big difference being that the mean-spirited moneylender, *Potter*, remains unredeemed. The movie's message is not, as many have moaned, that we should '*make do and mend*', and be content with our lot, but that the simple accommodations and acts of kindness of an individual – even those which are really little more than common courtesies – have an impact. One man *can* make a difference.

But this *isn't* a thread about *George*.

I want to tell you about *Larry*. All Santa brought Larry in 1980 - as Dino so sonorously put it – was the '*Christmas Blues*'. Like Santa he'd been given the sack, but his was, sadly, empty. For the second year running he'd been laid-off just as the festive season approached. With the dawning of the coldest December Kansas had endured in a decade, it wasn't just the early frost that was making him feel the pinch. Homeless and hungry, his gut aching, he chanced his luck in a diner, ordering a meal he *knew* he couldn't pay for - sure that the best he could hope for would be a less than fun-filled ride in Officer Rudolph's Black-and-White hundred reindeer-power sleigh to the local cop shop, and a criminal record.



Santa.

The afternoon dragged and darkened. Larry shifted shamefully on his stool, endlessly topping-up his coffee - postponing the fearful moment when he would be forced to declare his destitute deception, and invite the wrath of his host, Cookie, who was busying himself wiping the tables behind him.

'*Scuse me, sir...*' Larry tensed as Cookie put a firm hand on his shoulder. The poverty stricken patron turned nervously, expectant of angry confrontation. '*...you seem to have*

dropped something.' Cookie held out two ten dollar bills, smiled knowingly, and with a cheery '*Merry Christmas, sir!*' went about his business. Speechless, Larry was spared the horror of humiliation and a criminal record. He paid his tab, and went on his way, with a new spring in his step.

Shortly afterwards, his fortunes still fickle, but faring better than before, he noticed a Car-hop freezing outside another diner. '*I think I got it bad*', he thought to himself '*She's out there in this cold making nickels and dimes.*' As he left, he slipped her \$20. '*Sir,*' she said, '*you have no idea what this means to me.*'

Oh, but he *did*.

Larry Stewart's fortunes fared fantastically in the following years. He scraped together a stake, and set-up business in the boom industries of cable television and telecommunications. They made him a millionaire many times over. Shrewd but fair, he earned the respect of his peers and the admiration of his employees. Yet, for all his success he hardly seemed to live extravagantly.

It was only a few months before his death from Esophageal Cancer, in 2006, that it became clear what he had been doing with his fortune.

Starting in Kansas he began a personal, anonymous campaign of personal, anonymous philanthropy – giving directly to the needy, rather than through established charities, because he knew from bitter personal experience that many felt shamed by the prospect of *asking* for help. These were gifts of \$100 or \$200 – small by a Millionaire's reckoning, but which meant far more because they were acts of genuine goodwill...not impersonal tax-deductible business write-offs. After 9/11 he travelled to New York, moving amongst the homeless and displaced. In 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, his health failing, he went to Mississippi. It was only then that the mysterious '*Secret Santa*' began to train his '*Elves*', who distributed an estimated \$65,000 during the winter of Larry's final Christmas. By his death he was thought have given away \$1,300,000. Possibly *much* more.

Touched by the selfless kindness of a humble waiter – Larry Stewart helped and inspired thousands of people in their darkest hours. This gentleman was sustained by a Christian belief I don't share – but I find his *broader* faith - in humanity's potential for good - enormously inspiring.

His legacy is the *Society of Secret Santas* who encourage nothing more than anonymous altruism – a celebration of the best humanity has to offer: humility, compassion, good humour, a galvanising belief in the (oft derided) Brotherhood of Man.

It's A Wonderful Life? No, not always - but with people like *George Bailey*, Cookie, Larry and the countless Secret Santas and Elves they inspired in it, it *can* be.

So join me in a toast to the *Secret Santa*, this year – or, better yet, follow his example

THE SANTA CHRONICLES Part 5

Humbuggeration

A confession. One which may surprise many who have read my last few seasonally centred columns.


I don't like Christmas.

No...*really!* The degree to which I cannot be arsed with the whole sorry, self-indulgent business could not be accurately calculated by Steven Hawking.

I don't like turkey, I bloody loathe sprouts, and Pudding bungs me up.

Merry Christmas? Bah-Humbug!
How long will it take you to actually pay off your holiday debts?
Take the Scrooge-O-Meter test and find out.

Scrooge-O-Meter



Amount you plan to charge on holiday gifts \$:

Annual Percentage Rate:

Monthly Payment \$:

Months required to pay balance:

Your total payment will be:

Your total interest payment will be:

Bah! Humbug!

The music is all-pervasive, and almost universally dreadful. There was a case, a couple of years back, of German shop-workers who successfully sued their employers for 'Emotional Distress' on account of having to endure cursed Cliff, bastard Bing and sodding Slade interminably urging them to have a *Wunnerful Christmas Time* throughout the season. Speaking as an old hand on the Grotto floor – spending up to eight hours a day listening to this twaddle – I can sympathise. There is a childrens' album featuring such ordure inducing ditties as 'Teddies Love Christmas' and 'Santa's Workshop Song' which may result, should I ever encounter it's authors, in my donning my Santa suit (in ceremonial homage to the shamanic spirit of the priests of Odin) and specially re-staging the *Wild Hunt*. It's perhaps telling that my favourite festive ditty is the Mediaeval 'Coventry Carol', which concerns Ho-Ho-Herod's *Slaughter of the Innocents!*). The telly is rotten...and, as many out there can testify from recent experience, our already crap public transport system goes into freefall at the first flake of snow. *Dreaming of a White Christmas?* Aye...right!

Now, before you brand me as the *Grinch*, I should point out that I am a Guardian reader and a dyed-in-the-wool '80s student lefty. I'm *all for* charity, universal brotherhood and that gubbins. I *like* giving. I'm no *Ebenezer Scrooge*.

I *can*, however, sympathise with certain sentiments of that hard-faced old misanthrope. Could anyone who has passed by a branch of *Brighthouse* in December deny the truth of "*What's Christmas time... but a time for paying bills without money?*" He gleefully called the season "*Harvest time for the money-lenders*", and it still is. Now more than ever. I am, oft-times, inclined to agree with his famous curse "*Every idiot who goes about with Merry Christmas on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.*" It's not the *sentiment* I object to, so much as the insincerity behind it, much of the time: I'm all for *Goodwill To All Men*, I just don't see why I have to fit it in to a specific slot in my calendar.

I'm not a believer, myself, but surely it must rankle those possessed of genuine Christian faith that their Holiest of Holy Days (even if it was half-inched from carousing shag-happy pagans) is being so easily and dismissively taken in vain: how could one better celebrate the birth of the Messiah than by getting rat-arsed, screwing the Temp and photocopying one's arse? I genuinely resent that we are expected to be '*Merry*', and to accept all manner of loutish, laddish idiocy as acceptable '*because it's Christmas*'. Well "*Bah, humbug!*" to that. I choose when I'm going to be cheery or civil. Not that that happens very often...

It's a time for family and friends. Yup. Yes in deedy-doo. *That* must be why the suicide rate soars for the festive fortnight – as half the country realises that they've bankrupted themselves and bugged up the environment with an alarming tonnage of dead trees, non-biodegradable tinsel and several forests worth of wrapping paper....all for the sake of appeasing people they really have precious little, save for DNA, in common with. It's no surprise that the Off-Licenses are those that *really* profit from the Christmas Spirit.

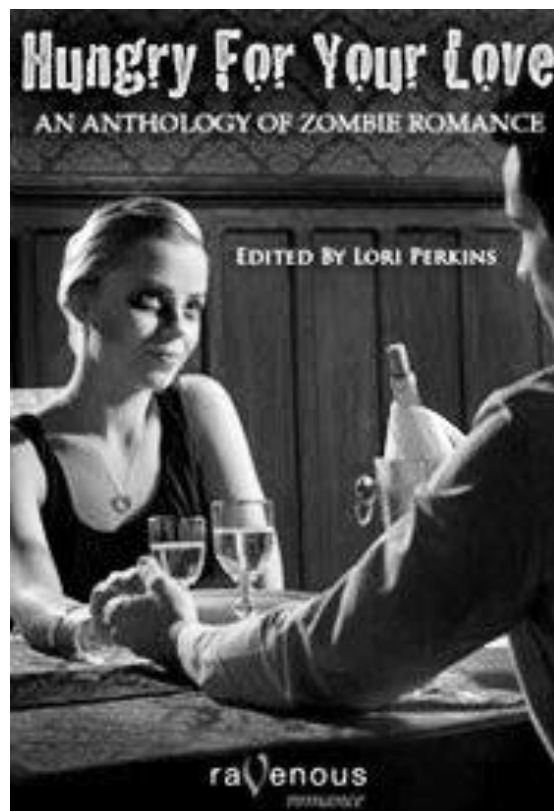
I *do* have a sentimental side. I love Kapra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) and Henry Koster's *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), both of which have their fair share of seasonal saccharine – and, of course, angels to guide their earnest protagonists. The tinkling of the Christmas Tree bell at the end of the former flick prompts a response from me that Ivan Pavlov would be proud of: Jimmy Stewart's "*Thattaboy, Clarence! Thattaboy!*" tickles my tear-ducts in a way that nothing else can. I find the token Christmas episode of Chris Carter's *Millennium*, '*Omerta*', similarly affecting: having spent two and a half series dwelling upon the darkest, direst depths of human iniquity, the show focussed – albeit briefly – on characters possessed of a blissful, empowering (dare I say *redemptive*?) innocence. Like *A Christmas Carol*, though, such stories acknowledge the altruism and civic mindedness of individuals often *in spite of* the expectations of others, reflecting the reformed Scrooge's view that "*Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.*" Like the legacy of '*Secret Santa*' Larry Stewart, these tales celebrate the

causality of personal action, not some arbitrary sense of seasonal obligation. As one of the Spirits warns Ebenezer *"There are some upon this earth of yours...who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all out kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on themselves, not us."* And surely that's the single most powerful point made in a novella which is really a meditation on personal responsibility. *We* shape our destinies. *We* – through our actions and our expectations - shape the world we live in.

That's why though I dislike Christmas, I *love* Santa. Let's face it, he lost any religious connotation – be it pagan or Christian – a long time ago, and became something far greater, more powerful and all-embracing...an avatar of goodwill, of a belief in mankind's capacity for hope, kindness, generosity of spirit and limitless altruism. I'd worship *him*, any day.

DEAD SEXY

Most horror is about sex. No, gentle friends, I'm not seeking to ring in the New Year with a bit of Freudian confession, though saucy Siggy would have had his hands full trawling the tortuous psyche of some of my angsty exes. No, I mean that sex and sexuality tends to lie at the heart of those iconic archetypes which populate our pop-culture nightmares.



Oh dear.

Sex and Death have long been linked, in everything from Gothic Melodrama to Teen Slasher flicks. The vampire was little more than a slaving (and deeply dull) ghoul before Polidori, LeFanu and Stoker cloaked them in courtly refinements and made them seductive nocturnal predators with penetrative predilections: *Lord Ruthven*, *Carmilla*, *Big Daddy Drac*, *Varney* and *True Blood's Bill Compton* all seem as interested in humping as in haem. We know that even a man who is pure of heart and says his prayers by night may become an unsubtle metaphor for uninhibited lust when the *Wolfbane blooms* and the *Autumn Moon is bright*. It's actually surprising that lunar cycles and menstruation were so seldom linked in lycanthropic terms before Alan Moore's splendid tale, 'The Curse', in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #40 (1985), and John Fawcett's 2000 film *Ginger Snaps*, and it's inevitable cycle of sequels and prequels: while such connections are freely made in many mythologies the *unmentionable* terrors lurking in ladyparts were just too too dreadful for (still predominantly male) horror audiences of ages past to deal with. That said, the staggering awfulness of Mitchell Litchtensein's *Vagina Dentata* horror, *Teeth* (2007), owed less to male fears of female sexuality than a completely cack-handed script (the film's enduring claim-to-fame is that it won the 2008 *Scream Award* for 'Most Memorable Mutilation'...for 'Penis Bitten Off By Vagina With Teeth'). Karloff's *The Mummy* (1931) had the hots for Zita Johan, and even *Frankenstein's Monster* only goes completely off the rails when his creator deprives him of the promised prospect of a shag.

Then there's the *Zombie* - perhaps the least sexy of all the classic monsters. The *Unquiet Dead* were a common trope in tales of mystery and suspense – they recur, of course, in Poe, Bierce (who's unsettling 'The Death of Halperin Frayser' is well worth a look) in Victorian Gothic horrors and the sensationalist pulps of the early 20th-century – but the rambling revenant of popular culture doesn't really crop up until the publication of W.B. Seabrook's memoir of Haitian Vadou, *The Magic Island* (1929).

For the best part of two decades the mystically reanimated corpse was an *exotic* horror, grounded in mystical African tradition – but made more disturbing by the unsettling possibility (hinted at even in the very first *Zombie* feature-film, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) that revival and thrall was as much pharmacological as magical. This was a horror grounded in contemporary reality. Something new. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of *White Zombie*, of course, was the protagonists' attitude to the undead: Haitian natives enslaved in a sugar refinery hardly give them pause for thought, but a sole white woman robbed of her free will and placed at the whim of a lustful plantation owner...now that just wasn't on. 'With these ZOMBIE EYES he rendered her powerless...' the lobby poster proclaimed '...With his ZOMBIE GRIP he made her perform his every desire!' Except, of course, he (Bela Lugosi) *didn't*. Natives could shot, enslaved or casually hefted into threshing machines, but the blonde gets to keep her virtue in the presence of *Johnny Foreigner*.

For years Zombies remained utterly sexless. Mostly they were metaphors for slavery and exploitation – from Robert E. Howard's sinister slice of Southern Gothic, 'Pigeons

From Hell (Weird Tales, 1938), through to Hammer's *Plague of the Zombies* (John Gilling, 1966) – or the dehumanisation of society in crisis, evident as early as William Cameron Menzies' 1936 film of H.G.Wells *Things To Come*, where a weaponised viral plague – a 'Wandering Sickness' – prefigures the man-made contagions of so many more recent horrors. Both the senseless shambling of cadaverous former consumers around Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) shopping mall and their mindless need to sate hunger at any cost are critiques of a society in crisis.

One of the most disturbing trends – to my mind – in the growing 'Zombie Apocalypse' sub-genre, is that the *Other* – the monstrous being whose capacity to horrify is grounded in our understanding that *he* is *us* – is the alarmingly skewed morality it brings with it. We become the predators – in X-Box shoot-'em-up and Hollywood blockbuster alike – the horror of the *end of sentience* and personal/societal collapse is replaced by destructive glee. We cease to seek explanations as to *how* or *why* the dead return – opting, instead, just to break out the Uzis. The Monsters become an excuse for us to dehumanise ourselves. A rooftop gunman in Gary Crutchley's strip 'Job Satisfaction', in the appropriately titled *Zombies* anthology (2007) berates a friend for lamenting the apocalypse: "*This is the fucking bollocks, mate. I love this!...I lived at home with my Mum and her boyfriend. I had a shitty job working in a warehouse. Couldn't drive. Didn't have a girlfriend....why would I want to go back to that?...Here I got me some good mates, self respect, a job I love, loads of sex and a big fucking gun! Why would I not like that?*" Are we becoming what David Chalmers' termed 'Philosophical Zombies' - in *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (1996)) – exhibiting the appearance and behaviour of a human being but with diminished morality, consciousness and social awareness. We see similarly socially critical riffs in recent fare, such as John Ajvide Lindqvist's novel *Handling The Undead* and Sheperd and Boney's comic series *Dead Eyes Open* (SLG Publishing, 2005).

Perhaps, as Zombies tell us so much about ourselves, it's hardly surprising that they are now starting to get down and dirty, as evidenced in the oddest gift I got from Santa, *Hungry For Your Love: A Zombie Romance Anthology* (Ed. Lori Perkins, 2009).

Still, if the Living Dead can get their ends away there may be hope for me!

I HATE CHUCK

Hate is a funny old thing. Yet – as any seasoned geek or who has pondered 'pon the many and various *Points of Ordure* levelled for and against *Doctor Who* producer Russell T. Davies in recent weeks – hate is a driving force in fandom.

Hate *can* be positive. Fans of *Jericho* focussed their ire at CBS's decision to axe the show after it's first season into a campaign of discontent, sending twenty-two tons of mixed nuts to the studio HQ - prompted by a character's quote of a US commander's infamous response to German requests to surrender, at the 1944 *Battle of the Bulge*. "Nuts!" said General McAuliffe. "Nuts!" said tens of thousands of angry fans...and they,

after much delay, got their second season. Fanboys fume, *still*,— over studios' failure to similarly save that nice Mr Whedon's *Firefly* and *Dollhouse*.

Angry old-school Trekkies raged against *The Evil That Is Chris Pine* before J. J. Abram's *Star Trek* revival even had a trailer. Sight-unseen, Sherlockians (myself included) raged against Guy Richie's irregular Baker Street shenanigans. Twelve years on, despite apologies, Joel Schumacher remains unforgiven for his 1997 day-glo *Batman and Robin* – though I can clearly remember the ire with which fearsome fanboys greeted Tim Burton's tweaks to continuity in *earlier* entries to that franchise. As of 10th January 2010 350,337 people have signed an online petition requesting director (I use the term very loosely) Uwe Boll to retire from the film industry.

Why? Is there a sense that a boundary has been crossed – some notion of a character or a franchise existing, immutable and inviolable in a fixed-state of Geek Grace and Cultural Ownership? Did Schumacher's Bat-nipple naffness prevent anyone enjoying the comics, or stop ChrisNolan opening up a whole new can of worms with his new twist on the Dark Knight (remember when the thought of casting Heath Ledger as the Joker prompted blood and thunder?)? No.

The are *only* films, comics and TV shows. Hardly worth all that *passion*...all that *rage*.

Not that I'm immune. Not entirely.



Tasteful, Chuck.

I *loathe* Chuck Austen.

Now, by all accounts Chuck's a fairly liberal chap: a Bush-baiter – which *should* endear him to me. But, no. *Dearie me, no*. I hate Infernal Austen and All His Works with an evangelical passion. This shared enmity, indeed, was the first things to impress me about the late lamented Pete Root, proprietor of Glasgow's *City Centre Comics*, whose response to bright-eyed innocents in search of Chuck's chuff was the simple (but heartfelt) entreaty to "*Get the fuck out of my shop!*"

I liked Pete.

So why am I, who can delight in such a wide variety of four-colour frippery – from the silliness of the Silver Age to the self-indulgent obscurantism of Alan Moore - so set against Austen. Well...our Chuck's a mucky pup. Taking over *Uncanny X-Men* in 2002 he had long-time supporting character, *Polaris* – hitherto a model of fidelity - respond to finding out she was *Magneto's* daughter by...copping off with a stripper. In another tale X-nubiles *Jubilee* and *Husk* keep a graveside vigil and...exchange teen sex fantasies. At DC he resurrected the tortuously twee feud 'twixt Super-squeezes, Lana and Lois. Are these criticisms Fanboy flaps at much-loved continuities being tinkered with? Inevitably – and as the website *Women In Refrigerators* disturbingly illustrates, women are often dealt with rather badly by male comic creators - but there does seem to be something darker going on, here.

His blatant knock-off of Warren Ellis's *The Authority*, *Worldwatch*, and his US Manga, *The Boys of Summer* both foundered because audiences found his increasingly violent sexual obsessions distasteful. Ah, he cried, I *can't* be a misogynist – I'm *married*, a *father*, and was *raised by a single-Mom*. Yes, Chuck: so was Josef Fritzl, and I don't think you'll find *him* on Germaine Greer's Christmas Card list. Anyone who *really* wants to get to grips (as it were) with Austen's *Id* should seek out his 'semi-autobiographical' porn title, *Strips* (1991). Or not. Not would be better. *Really*. As to religion – well, I'm not a believer *myself*, but this boy has *issues*.

Largely I loathe him 'cause...well...he's *crap*. And derivative. His mordant, melodramatic *Justice League of America* arc, '*Pain of the Gods*', (#101-106, 2004), wherein the greatest heroes of the DCU fac failure on a personal level *could* have – Hell, *should* have – been an opportunity for a detailed deconstruction of the heroic ideal. Instead it served up the same dreary, grim-and-gritty sensationalist slop that self-styled 'edgy' '80s hacks resorted to when originality fails them. As it so often did. The final issue carried the cover-tag '*No More Pain!*'. I can't speak for Capes, but after six issues of wrist-splitting sentiment the readers *surely* sighed with relief.

What annoys me *most* about Austen – and this gets me genuinely angry, at times (a ludicrous response, as comic continuity being what it is, his follies *can be* – and in some cases already *have been* - ret-conned into oblivion) is that, like that purveyor of pulchritudinous man-boobage, straps and pouches-a-plenty, Rob Leifield, he remained inexplicably popular for so bloody long. Well, that's not quite true. Their runs at *Marvel* were critically derided, and I think it's only the absence of letter columns during Austen's

tenure at the House of M that deprived many regular X-philes the opportunity to fully vent their spleen - though *his* petulant rants at the 'Seven Deadly Trolls', his most vitriolic internet critics, are legendary. Still, both were fortunate enough to enjoy lengthy stints in and around *Professor X's alma mater* and as any comic-buff knows...good or bad, X sells.

There are others more deserving of my scorn, I know. *Former* greats – innovators like John Byrne and Frank Miller who have disappeared up their own self-referential artistic arseholes, scorning critics (check out Byrne's forum <http://www.byrnerobotics.com>: it's either a hysterical exercise in irony – where, *Dr Doom* style, he exists largely in the third-person - or very very sad) – but since the sad passing of Pete Root, I feel it almost a *duty* to fan the flames of Chuck-hate.

Git.

HACK FOR HIRE

As a writer I producing short scripts and skits of a very specific length, style and structure for clients (for the most part) within the 'Heritage Industry' or Tourism for Pseuds, as it might be better termed.

I'm a Hack.

Surely not, you say, *our erudite and illustrious Hangman, a mere scribbler-for-hire?* After all, what scribe worth his salt would wish to be defined as 'a hireling who undertakes unpleasant or distasteful tasks for money or reward' or 'a writer hired to produce routine or commercial writing', after all? Well, almost all of them, I would imagine....if they want chips (or pom frit, if they have such aspirations) to sprinkle their salt on.



Hangman's first typewriter...still in use, from time to time!

I take it as a compliment. It puts me in good company, after all. Shakespeare was a Hack, chopping out blood-and-thunder melodramas guaranteed to get groundlings' bums on seats at The Globe – and derided by the refined, literary (and – oh, the *irony* - all but forgotten) 'University Wit' Robert Greene as an 'upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers'. Sir Walter Scott was lauded as a poet, but his prodigious prose output resulted from his need to pay-off crippling debts incurred by a failed business venture - and he was on a paltry page-rate for most of his professional life, and criticised by his peers in genteel Edinburgh society for creating a twee, populist perception of Scottish history and identity (indeed, works like *Rob Roy* (1817) and *Redgauntlet* (1824) are probably responsible for the evolution – for good *and* ill - of the same modern Scottish tourist culture which occupies so much of *my* professional life).

Sometimes the grasping hand of graft is clearly seen in Scott's scribbling. I was told by a university tutor that the best way to read his novels was to miss out the second chapter and the first six pages of each subsequent chapter, as that's where he put the 'padding'. It's largely true. He did tell a *damned good* story, though.

The serious reputation of Charles Dickens' arose from his passionate social criticism (the Harper-Collins collection *A December Vision*, edited by Neil Philip, is well worth seeking out), but his novels – the popular part-work soap-operas of their age – had just as much power: his depiction of the vile *Wackford Squeers* and his wretched school *Dotheboys Hall*, in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) resulted in a wholesale reorganisation of England's schools, *Oliver Twist* (1838) did at least as much - in an unashamedly sensational and melodramatic manner, calculated to tug on the heart-strings of readers – to highlight the social injustices experienced by unwanted children in Victorian society...and shifted books by the cart-load.

These boys were tarts, but tarts with ability, energy imagination and, most importantly, something to say. They had a point - a purpose besides the simple telling of a tale.

Doyle resurrected *Holmes* because – being a canny Edinburgh laddie - he realised the financial benefits of doing so, though he resented that his literary fictions and historical novels were neglected by the public. H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard are *immeasurably* influential in the shaping of modern horror and fantasy fiction, the former introducing issues of gender, class, ethnicity and alternative mythologies which supplanted earlier Gothic traditions, but their tales – sold by the page to pulp magazines and anthologists – owed far more to earlier scribblers-for-hire - like Twain and Poe - than to Tolkien, Lewis or their Inklings alumni (whose influence is - oddly - simultaneously more generally accepted and somewhat less specifically tangible).

Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain and others democratized crime fiction, rescuing it from generations of twee and tweedy Anglos (as Raymond Chandler put it, in *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950) 'The English may not always be the best writers in the world, but they are incomparably the best dull writers'.) by battering out penny-a-word whimsy for the likes of *Black Mask Magazine*. W. H. Auden said that the works of

Chandler '*should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as Works of Art*', which is simultaneously *flattering* and *arse-cripplingly pompous*. Why can't they be *both*? The cultural commentary in Chandler was incidental detail - he *hated* it being considered 'literary', and mocked those who failed to realise that his talent was in telling well a very particular kind of popular tale: '*when I write something that is tough and fast and full of mayhem and murder, I get panned for being tough and fast and full of mayhem and murder, and then when I try to tone down a bit and develop the mental and emotional side of a situation, I get panned for leaving out what I was panned for putting in the first time*'.

Now, '*popular*' and '*prolific*' don't necessarily equate with '*good*' or '*worthy*' – Brown, Archer, Paterson, Hubbard, Hutson and their irksome ilk knock that idea into orbit with a casual cudgel of thermonuclear force – though I'm sure that, so long as they find an undemanding audience (as they *inevitably* will), they will endure. Dickens and Chandler are celebrated largely because their popularity afforded them greater longevity than their peers, after all. Brown and his ilk are a different *class* of Hack to the likes of Charlie or Ray: they contribute *nothing* new, *nothing* original, *nothing* distinctive to our culture, our experience, or our understanding of ourselves. With them a story is...well, just words.

Now I'm *no* Shakespeare or Scott – I have no illusions, there - but I do like there to be some *point* to what I write. I try to add something of myself. As I've said before on these pages, I believe that our history and mythology – my thematic realm - is a vital, valuable *Cultural Currency*. A tale - of '*mad, bad*' Lord Byron, say - should speak of *that* man, and *his* age...but of *our* culture's attitude to infamy and 'celebrity', too.

If that provokes a response from an audience, I'm happy. If it fills my fridge, I'm happier.

I'm a hack.

THE BIG MAN

I first encountered Orson, on a wet Saturday afternoon, sometime in the '70s. He was, as I recall, being very rather *unkind* to Joan Fontaine on an unconvincing grassy knoll, morosely masticating his borrowed English vowels, and, indeed, the scenery. We had met some time earlier, as he lolled loquaciously, huffing his Havana, corpulent on the *Couch of Chat* – though I was oblivious in my nascent buffery that that roly-poly raconteur was the same wild-eyed young *Rochester*, so seemingly intent on giving *Jane Eyre* a hard time.

He had an unashamed theatricality that appealed to me, be it in the monochrome marvellousness of the weekend double-bill on BBC2 or schmoozing with Parky - fascinating and infuriating in equal measure. A coyote. A trickster.

A *fascinating* individual. He made his acting debut in 1931 – just a little past his sixteenth birthday - at Dublin's *Gate Theatre*, persuading it's Director (he *claimed*) that he was a slumming Broadway star. By 1934 he was staging *his own* international drama

festival, in New York – one of the leading lights of the *Federal Theatre Project*, by the following year. Seeking a wider audience (and new toys to play with) he turned to radio - the most popular medium of the day - starring in *The Shadow*, and as scriptwriter, director and star of his own *Mercury Theatre of the Air* – hurtling at breakneck speeds between rival New York studios to participate in back-to-back broadcasts.

At twenty-three his Halloween 1938 his adaptation of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* – updated, and presented, partly, as a faux news broadcast – earned him international notoriety. It's hard to fathom how the public were so *easily* deceived by this clever but *highly stylised* drama, which provoked mass panic as citizens - convinced that nearby Grover's Mill was the hub of a Martian invasion - evacuated their New Jersey homes. Accustomed to the faux horrors of *Blair Witch* and *Cloverfield* it's perhaps difficult to imagine that anxious era's response to that radical appropriation of 'reality'. It's also difficult to believe that the baby-faced Orson was not a *tad* disingenuous when he claimed to have no idea that his 'little spook-show' might have such an impact. A *trickster*, as I said.

Hollywood beckoned and...*that's* where the 'frustration' comes in.

Not that his films were *bad*. The same imagination and willingness to take risks which had made him such a theatrical *wunderkind* have ensured that his first flick, 1941's *Citizen Kane*, the epic deconstruction of the life of a magnate *not-so-loosely* based upon William Randolph Hearst – is often hailed as *The Greatest Film Ever Made*, lauded by generations of film-makers and critics. Like his Wells adaptation, it's easy for modern audiences to underestimate just quite *how* remarkable *Kane* is, as it's narrative techniques and technical innovations are now so much part of the common currency of contemporary cinema. Every viewing leaves me breathless.

Think about that. Your very *first* film is *The Big One*, praised by your professional peers, but indifferently received by the public, and by the studio (largely because the vengeful Hearst's media machine succeeded in delaying it's release and limiting distribution – for some reason 'Randy' objected to his nickname for his mistress, Marion Davies's, clitoris, 'Rosebud', becoming part of cinema history). What *next*? Can you improve upon *The Greatest Film Ever Made*?

He *tried*, and it's intriguing to wonder if *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) *might* have succeeded – had populist producers not panicked and sidelined the director, substituting editor Robert Wise (whose achievements behind the camera were *far* in the future) to simplify – and eviscerate -Welles's complex narrative. *Ambersons* introduced lighting and sound-design techniques we now take for granted, but it's a *shadow* of what it *might* have been.

Welles' set himself at odds with the Hollywood machine for the next four decades. It reciprocated: he was *tricky* - 'Art-house' – the first, according to Truffaut and the *New Wave*, of the modern *auteurs* (though I think that does Fritz Lang a disservice,

personally). Hollywood didn't trust those unwilling to compromise - and he struggled for support.



Orson Welles...boy genius.

We see *flashes* of that early genius – in the mirrored showdown from *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947), *The Stranger's* (1946) nightmarish clocktower, the explosive tracking-shot introducing *Touch Of Evil* (1958), and various scenes in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) where that director was *clearly* bullied into indulging Orson's creative ego. The accidental illumination of Harry Lime in that Vienna doorway and the skipping shadows on the grim grey walls as he makes his exit are unlike *anything* Reed ever filmed. They are, however, *pure* Orson. As a performer his demand on screen diminished inversely with his gargantuan waistline (though his finest performance is, without a doubt, his impassioned – and utterly heartfelt – damning of the Death Penalty, in *Compulsion* (1959)).

He remained *popular*, of course – especially on radio. He resurrected *The Third Man* as the raffish anti-hero of *The Lives of Harry Lime* (1951-52), and was the 'obedient host' of *The Black Museum* (1951). He'd crop up as *Professor Moriarty* in the John Gielgud *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1954), or to give *class by-association* to ropey dross like Matt Zimmer's atrocious *Butterfly* (1982) (a vehicle for Pia Zadora, wife of Meshulam Riklis, who was determined that she should be a star, despite a staggering lack of talent – an ironic mirror of the relationship between Hearst and Davies...and *Kane* and *his* fictional mistress, *Susan Alexander*). He was the king of the voice-over – from *Unicron* in *Transformers: The Movie* (1986) to Carlsberg lager adverts.

He died, aged 70, on 10th October 1985, two hours after appearing on *The Merv Griffin Show* – mythologising himself to the last - laying *misinformation-mines* for would-be biographers: a white-bearded caricature of the magician of old. Natural, I suppose, for one whose glories lay so *far* behind him. He'd lost confidence – momentum, too – after *Ambersons* dented his ego. I admire the majestic uncompromising old ham - but lament his egotistic, truculent culpability in that lost potential...of what he *might* have been and done.

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH

I first fell for a blonde in fishnets when I was about seven. At a church jumble sale. Not that the Kirk *encouraged* such brazen hussery. I might still be there, otherwise. She was a florist, apparently. I'd never actually *seen* a florist in fishnets, but the nascent Calvinist in me doubted that the Womens' Guild would approve her boot-tastic re-arrangement of baddies' (*ahem*) bulbs. ...which, as is often the case, made it *more fun*. Eschewed the festivities, I contented myself under a table with my newly acquired stash of scraggy comics...



Florist by day, ass-kicker by night (c) DC Comics

The blonde was, of course, *Dinah Lance*, the *Black Canary* – paramour of *Oliver Queen*, the *Green Arrow*, and, like him, a reinvention of a classic Golden Age character (first appearing in *Flash Comics* #86, 1947, and *More Fun Comics* #41, 1941, respectively). Actually that's not *quite* true. The new *Arrow* had grown a spanking new '60s social-conscience and bore no *real* resemblance – save for his Robin Hood fetish – to his original. *Dinah*, though, was the same character, transported to the main DC

Universe, *Earth 1*, from her home Golden Age, *Earth 2*, continuity during a team-up between the *Justice League* and *Justice Society*. This dimension hopping had granted her a sonic '*Canary Cry*' – conveniently, as a mere mastery of Judo might not have impressed her now neighbours, most of whom had their *own* comics.

Unmarried – near scandalously for '70s DC strips – *Dinah* and *Ollie* were living together as man and wife. They were a radical, *saucy* pair (you just *knew* *Batman* wouldn't approve). They also battled like billio. The 'return' of Ollie's ward, Roy '*Speedy*' Harper, revealed to have been living as a heroin addict in Denny O'Neill's 1971 excellent story '*Snowbirds Don't Fly*', in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #85-86, is hailed as the point where comics (DC Comics, particularly) started to *grow up*. O'Neill's work with Neal Adams on that title has stayed in my memory, as has *Dinah*'s role at the emotional centre of that story, berating *Hal* and *Ollie* for their angry, reactionary response to someone so clearly in need of aid, encouragement and love – something which she, and she alone, fully provides.

A pity, then, that she was so poorly treated editorially – treated as an adjunct to *Green Arrow*'s mythologies. I missed the worst of it, of course. By the time I returned to my four-colour fancies, in the mid-'90s, *Hal* and *Ollie* were dead, and *Dinah*...? I found her, finally, in Mike Grell's *Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters* (1987) – kidnapped, beaten and possibly sexually assaulted (criticism has inclined Grell to be cagy on specifics), awaiting rescue from her enraged beau.

Hmmm.

A '*victim*'? Didn't sit right with me. It *does* fit a very distinct '80s trend, though, where writers seemed to assume that the only way to make a female character *interesting* in that newly grim-'n'-gritty age was to make her *suffer*.

Barbara Gordon got it worse, the following year, in Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke*. DC's response to the writer's request to paralyse one of the Silver Age's most popular icons was that he could '*shoot the bitch*', anytime he wanted.

I'd *like* to think that Moore was using shock tactics to create a tale with lasting emotional resonance, but that consequence *may* have been an incidental benefit: *Babs*' new persona, the mysterious hacker and information-broker, *Oracle*, remained little more than incidental to the Bat-books for years.

Then came *Birds of Prey*. An intriguing concept, Chuck Dixon paired two once iconic heroines who no-one *really* knew what to do with. The original one-shot (1986) engaged the down-at-heel *Dinah* as *Oracle*'s agent, as she stepped out from the *Shadow of the Bat* (as it were) and became more proactive in her crimefighting endeavours. Pragmatic, *Oracle* gave the *Black Canary* purpose. Compassionate, *Dinah* gave *Barbara* heart. Dixon's run on the title is grand: solid action- adventure, representing sexy – but never sexualised – heroines. Then the series faltered – oddly, under the pens of Terry Moore

and Gilbert Hernandez, both writers with fine reputation for writing powerful, believable female characters.

Having established the *Women In Refrigerators* website – detailing all the unpleasant ways in which female characters have been rendered ‘interesting’ by male writers (shamefully grim), it came as a surprise that the first thing Gail Simone did on *Birds* was...have the *Canary* captured, tortured (#51-56), and forced to relive her *Longbow Hunters* experience. But Gail’s gals ain’t no ‘victims’: but ‘twas belligerent *Helena Bertinelli*, *The Huntress* - another oft-neglected andjunct of the Bat-verse – not her angsty, possessive beau, who came to her aid, and *Dinah herself* who seized the day - surprisingly (but believably) aiding in her disturbed captor’s rehabilitation.

That’s Dinah.

Simone expanded *Oracle*’s roster – *Huntress*, *Big Barda*, *Manhunter*, *Lady Shiva*, *Lady Blackhawk* (my darling *Zinda*...who finally gives the group it’s name, in #86): a clearing-house of marginalised heroines (it’s no coincidence that her only original Bird is named *Misfit*). Like *Oracle*, Simone gave them *purpose*, but celebrated their uniqueness: *Huntress* is more vital, believable, infuriating and endearing in her first few issues, bickering with *her team-mates*, than in the *whole* of her ‘80s solo series. Simone writes *people* well, not just *super-people*.

Green Arrow was resurrected, and aged fanboys hooted that *Dinah* should be at his side. They were *meant* for each other. *I* hooted...but *I* was *wrong*. She’s a *big girl*. She’s *grown*. *Moved on*. She became more interesting *without* him. It happened anyway, and she *left* the *Birds*. Simone didn’t linger long: the *heart* of her book was gone, and the book soon followed. *Babs* returned to *Gotham*, mentoring the new *Batgirl*, and *Dinah*...well...*Dinah* became defined, once again by *Ollie*.

Mr Jagger used to sing, *you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone*, and editors have seen the error of their ways. *Dinah* and *Ollie* end joint-custody of their monthly title in the Spring. Gail is getting the gals ‘round, and the *Birds* will soon take flight once more.

So...*let’s hear it for the girls!*

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL Part 1

The Devil is in the Detail

Occasional ennui aside, I have precious little in common with Mick Jagger. I do, however share a little of his sympathy for the Devil.

It started early. At the ripe old age of six-and-a-half my irksome infantile inclination to ask awkward questions saw me booted out of Sunday School. My Dad being the organist, and my Godfather (appropriately enough) the Minister, this did *not* go down well. I was provoked! *God*, we were told, created *everything* – Heaven, Earth, Angels, Men, possibly even the French. So, who created the Devil? *God did*, they said...he was

an Angel – Lucifer, the Morningstar, who when the Big Cheese said ‘*Let there be light!*’ helpfully flicked the switch, and who fell from Grace and challenged the Authority of the Almighty.

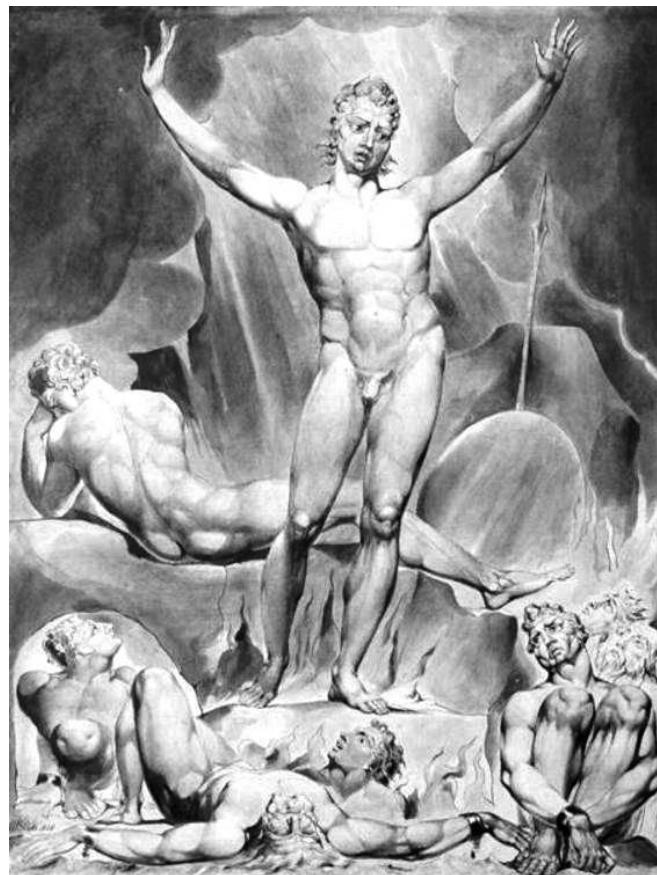
Right. *How?*

Eh?

How could he challenge the Almighty? *Adam* and *Eve*...*they* fell from Grace: they did something they were *expressly* told *not* to do (it wasn’t the Apple in the tree that caused trouble in *Eden*, after all, it was the *pair* on the ground!). A *bit* of a design fault, that – and one which, what with Angels being Divine – or at least a damned sight more Divine than us meat-puppets – should *not* have been evident in the Heavenly Host. If God is *Good*, how could he create something that was *Evil*? *Um...it was all part of his Plan.*

Now, I’m not claiming that I had *quite* grasped, however crudely, the fundamental mechanics of Providentialism, aged six, but that sounded to me like...well...*bollocks*. God *allows* the *Devil* – and *Evil* - to exist, but he’s not saying *how* or *why*? *Riiiiight*. This was the theological equivalent of those excuses so favoured by my contemporaries: ‘*Because!*’, ‘*It wisnae me!*’, and ‘*A big boy done it an’ ran away!*’

My disenfranchisement with religious orthodoxy and general dislike for obfuscatory ‘*passing the buck*’ began right there.



Satan Arousing the Rebel Angels (I BET he is!)

William Blake

Reading *The Bible* and – more because of an isolated geeky teenage affinity with *Frankenstein's Creature* than any desire for spiritual enlightenment – Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), I discovered, much to my surprise, that *Auld Hornie* got a bigger bum-rap than I originally imagined. The *Old Testament* never formally identifies him with *The Serpent* who tempts *Eve* to eat of the fruit of the *Tree of Knowledge* (certain *Apocrypha* assign that particular role to *Adam's* first wife, the *Lilith*, which – banished, as she was, for refusing to yield to any Will but her own – makes a *lot* of sense). Hebrew scriptures describe him as God's favourite son and adjutant, charged with the task of prosecuting those who defy or sin against their Creator.

Whooooa, there!

So Evil was around *before* he got booted downstairs? *God* is party to his persecution of the faithful *Job*: he *could* have stopped suffering but *chooses* not to? He's a fairly *minor* figure in Judaism. *Isaiah* (14:12) tells how he was '*brought down to Hell, to the bottom of the pit*' for seeking to be '*more exalted than the stars of Heaven*' – but not *how* that behaviour was even *possible* for the '*Son of the Morning*'. In Islam and Christianity – interestingly religions established in areas of the East and West where their developing faiths were in competition with established horned-god worshiping cults – *Satan* is much more important. An icon of the old ways; a ready-made whipping boy.

In Hebrew *Lucifer* means both '*Bringer of the Morning Light*' and '*Truth before Conformity*', and it's clearly the *latter* that appealed to John Milton. His *Satan* is a true *Prometheus*, burning with intellectual fire. Of eating of the *Tree of Knowledge* he rages:

'Why [was it] forbid? Why but to awe,
Why but to keep ye low and ignorant...
Ye eat thereof, your eyes that seem so clear,
Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then
Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as gods.
So ye shall die perhaps, by putting off
Human, to put on gods...'

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing', as Pope (Alexander, that is, not the Pontiff) would later put it. True – but Mortality was a *paltry* price to pay for getting a spiritual swatch at the Boss's Blueprint for Creation. Milton's *Satan* is, curiously for the creation of a devout Christian, oddly sympathetic. He's *utterly* sincere and though *clearly* ticked off, is rarely malicious. He defies authority because it is his *nature* to rebel, and doesn't hold back when it comes to reminding his Creator who it was that proscribed that nature. If he is defiant – if he possesses Free Will - then it's because he was created with those qualities...and it's just a teeny wee bit churlish for God to complain about that *after the fact*.

No surprise that Mary Shelley's *Creature*, in *Frankenstein* (1818) finds it so easy to identify with Milton's anti-hero. He famously tells his creator '*Remember that I am thy creature—I ought to be thy Adam—but I am rather the Fallen Angel, whom thou drivest*

from joy for no misdeed' - an echo of Satan's '*loneliness is the first thing which God's eye named, not Good*' Except that this is a *misidentification*: it's *Frankenstein* who is the '*Modern Prometheus*', seeking to play God. He is 'Satanic', but flees *from* the Truth –and *toward* Conformity – when his rebellion fails. Milton's stoic creation does not. He accepts the consequences of his actions: '*Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven*'. Hell being, of course, created – like his nature – *by* God.

William Blake famously said that Milton was '*of the Devil's party without knowing it*'. He certainly made *Satan's* rebellion – pretty much for the first time in popular Western thought (the Gnostics aside...they were never *particularly* popular, save as Inquisitorial kindling) – not only *understandable*, but almost an intellectual *ideal*, and his image of the relentless rebel questing after knowledge, sure that '*The mind can make a heaven out of hell or a hell out of heaven*' was - to give the *Devil* his due – to become a hero, a blazing iconoclastic icon for the approaching Age of Enlightenment.

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL Part 2

Give The Devil His Due

I stand in the Pit, the ground beneath my feet thundering as I cast high my bitter, tearful gaze and rage to the Heavens - as much in sorrow as in spite - "I had the only love of God, once...but I lost that! I lost even that! What scraps of comfort remain for me in this World...?"

People wept. They *did*. They were *moved*. Admittedly most were not *expecting* Glasgow's underground railway to reverberate through the subterranean foundations of Glasgow's Tron Theatre *just* as The Devil began to lament his outcast state as the lonely *First of the Fallen* in the British premiere of St Lucien poet Derek Walcott's *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, adapted as *Wee Jock an' His Brithers* – the Carribean colonial metaphor of the original unsubtly shoe-horned into an account of the 19th-century Highland Clearances - but it gave a few of the lippier hecklers at 1988's *Scottish Student Drama Festival* reason to think twice before looking me in the eye in the Bar, afterwards.

I was, at this point, an avowed undergraduate '80s athiest, but could identify, still, with Scratch, Auld Hornie – the eternal iconoclast - who would surely approve of the earnest rage, riot and radicalism of that decade.

To be honest the Christian Devil, the *Great Beast of Revelation*, of Calvinish hellfire, brimstone and Dennis Wheatley never *really* appealed to me. He was a cackling Scriptural Super-Villain – *Mephisto*, *Dormammu*, *Neron* – serially thwarted by the square-jawed (and oddly Aryan) *Jehovah-Boy* and his ilk...but sure to rise again. Hardly, save in the minds of a minority of morally monochrome evangelicals, a *Clear and Present Danger* to the world as we know it. Ah, they'd say, like some ecclesiastical *Verbal Kint*, we'd fallen for His ploy - "the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

Nonsense.

In the *Compline* the faithful are warned, still, to *'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary The Devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour'* (1 Peter 5:8), but bat-wings and horns are out of *vogue*. The Perdition predator about town doesn't *'prowl'* – he waits for us to call his Agent. He ditched the bat-wings and the horns years ago. *The Devil* doesn't just have all the best tunes – these days he has the best suits, too. The *Price of Darkness* is a gentleman after all, of wealth and taste. Corporate Concupiscence is all the rage, darlings.

Clive Barker's *History of the Devil* (1980) presents the post-modern Promethean as a trickster on trial - manipulative, contrary, but *rarely* guilty of outright villainy: eager to engage with and observe humanity in *all* it's aspects, and constantly bemused by the contradictory natures of that *'army of ambitious ticks'* (and frustrated by the knowledge that he *resembles* us). If He is hateful it's rooted in the self-loathing of the *true* Freudian Egoist) who find themselves unable to properly *condemn* him because they share his existential ire with the *'Absentee Landlord'* of Creation.

Al Pacino's demonic John Milton (Heh!) in the otherwise awful *Devil's Advocate* (1997) puts it well: *"He gives man instincts. He gives you this extraordinary gift, and then what does He do?...He sets the rules in opposition...Look but don't touch. Touch, but don't taste. Taste, don't swallow!"* Hoo-ha! It's easy to sympathise with this devil – as His experience is our own. *"I'm here on the ground with my nose in it since the whole thing began. I've nurtured every sensation man's been inspired to have. I cared about what he wanted and I never judged him. Why? Because I never rejected him. In spite of all his imperfections, I'm a fan of man! I'm a humanist."* And He is – sincerely, I think. After all...we're all He's got!



The Prince of Darkness is a Gentleman...completwe with Tux!

(c) DC Comics

Many complain that the teasing tempter *du jour* – of *Bedazzled*, *Reaper*, *Little Nicky* and the like – is trivialised and somehow less potent and pernicious than the Biblical *Great Beast*. I don't think so. An habitual contrarian, he is *all about* Opposition, of giving Man or Messiah – Faust, St Francis, Job, Jesus or John Doe – an *alternative* view. “*All this will I give unto thee...*”, he says, offering us...well...*whatever* our hearts desire: “*Your call!*” We just have to accept the *consequences*. The *Great Deceiver* and the *Prince of Lies*? He's oddly *up front* about his agenda - just be sure to read the small print on that Contract when you sell him your Soul). This secularised Satan is the *Poster Child For Causality* whose message has remained the same since he first flipped that great Celestial Light-Switch, in The Beginning: *Free Will is a bitch!*

‘Course in his case, Free Will is also *never having to say you're sorry!* Mike Carey's *Lucifer*, in the comic series spun out from Gaiman's *Sandman*, is often branded as a Nietzschean figure – the embodiment of the *Will To Power*. Not so. He's Miltonic. He's opposes the ‘*Tyranny of Predestination*’ of Yahweh's Creation, and fashions his *own* – before relinquishing *all* authority over it (No goDs Allowed!). Why? Because the ultimate rebellion is, surely, a refusal to become what made us.

Reading Carey's *Lucifer*, ensconced in His Parisien night-club home, I was occasionally reminded of a song a cast-mate suggested to help me get into character as the *Fallen Angel* of Walcott's drama. A serious-minded spotty youth at the time, I thought it too frivolous to favour, at the time. Now, though, I think it rather fitting for the Anti-Hero of Milton and our modern age.

All together, now...

*I am what I am,
I don't want praise, I don't want pity.
I bang my own drum,
Some think it's noise - I think it's pretty.
And so what, if I love each feather and each spangle,
Why not try to see things from a diff'rent angle?
Your life is a sham 'til you can shout out loud
I am what I am!*

I'm sure we can *all* see *something* of ourselves in that.

Have I got *Sympathy for the Devil*? Damned right I do.

GHOST WRITER

It had to happen eventually, I suppose...

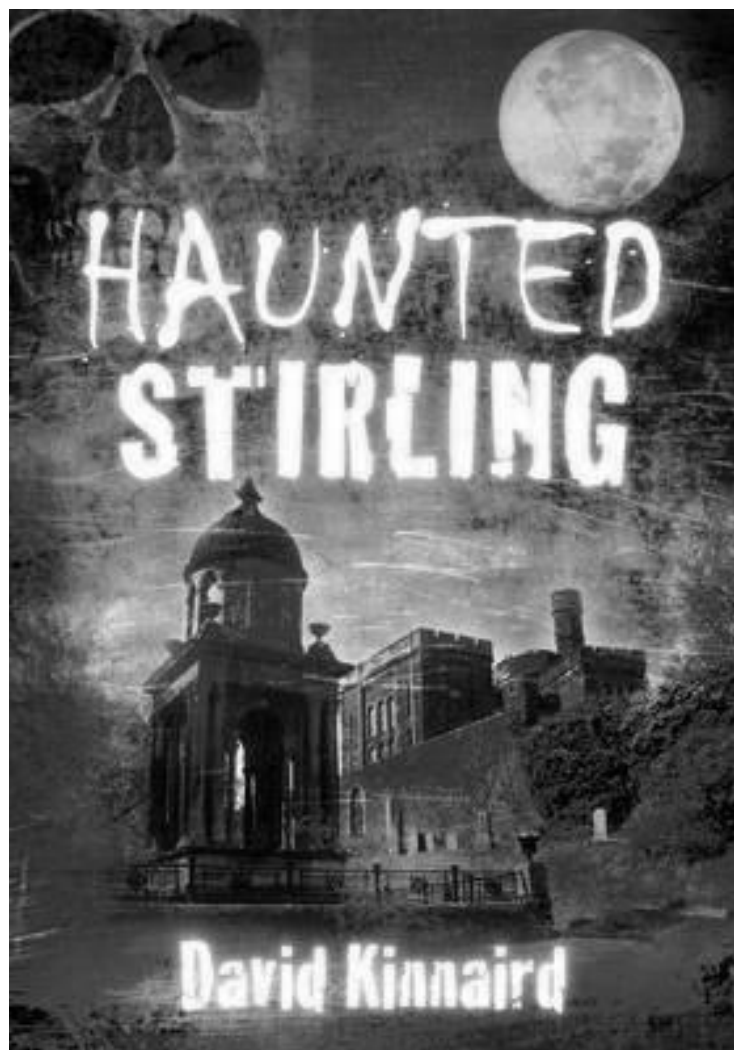
I was contacted this week by a publisher, asking if I might be interested in compiling an account of notable hauntings associated with Stirling. I have been a ghoulish gadabout for quite some time, researching, scripting and performing the *Stirling GhostWalk*. This

year, 2010, in fact, will mark the *twentieth anniversary* of my first slapping on the Leichner #102 Light Grey Crème Make-Up, cocking up my Beaver (it's a hat!), and assuming the mantle of Jock Rankin, the Royal Burgh's '*Happy Hangman*' for the first time. Many of the town's tales are presented on the *GhostWalk* website

– that's [www . StirlingGhostwalk . com](http://www.StirlingGhostwalk.com) –

shameless-plug pundits – so my familiarity with appropriate macabre material is no secret.

I have often been invited, over the years, to stand in the wind and rain atop the rocky outcrop of the Ladies' Hill, recounted spirited yarns to French, German, American and Belgian film crews – resisting requests to say the ghost of Mary, Queen of sodding Scots haunts the Castle (overseas broadcasters seem to favour famous phantoms). I've had to stifle my snickers as an outrageous Californian TV Psychic wittered wantonly on the woes of witches trapped and tortured within the walls of a building which not only didn't *exist* at the time of the Burgh's last wiccan-worrying outbreak, but actually served as a *brothel* at the time. Things *certainly* went bump in the night, there. Was the director interested in little things like *facts*? No – not while Witch Hazel was gibbering gaily in the corner, anyway.



Provisional Cover for...ahem...MY first book!

A couple of years back, some charmer provided the production office of a notorious British TV Medium, who was touring the country presenting shows based on the lore of different locations each week, with my number. *Would I like to take part in his Stirling show?* No. *Oh...why not?* Because I'd *seen* his show: while the '*willing suspension of disbelief*' is integral to the craft of the performer, I draw the line at validating the efforts of such a transparently fraudulent git. I did, however, provide the Production Assistant who called me with contact details for a number allegedly haunted houses. The proprietor of one - a restaurant occupying the former stables of the aforementioned brothel, afflicted with a poltergeist - agreed to be filmed, but got cold feet. It was too late to cancel the crew, though. Fine. I suggested that, the offending feature being broadcast before the Watershed, he simply couch his account in language unfavourable for family fare. Thus the stables beneath the bawdy-house became a '*16th-century Park & Ride*'...and didn't feature in the finished show.

Back to the book.

I thought it best to look through my library to see what was already in print about paranormal Stirling. Surprisingly little, considering the rich tradition of supernatural storytelling in the area. The best contemporary study was Geoff Holder's superb gazetteer *The Guide To Mysterious Stirling* (2008). I was at university with Geoff. Nice chap, as I recall.

Looking through this informative tome I chanced upon his account of the supposed haunting of the old Tollbooth - currently the Old Town's arts centre, but formerly the Burgh jail and courthouse (and domain of the *Happy Hangman*; twice, in fact - the historical Jock was jailor, and I had an office and dressing-room there) - by the last man publicly hanged in Stirling, the octogenarian wife-murderer, Alan Mair.

Mair, weakened by imprisonment, was carried to the gallows, strapped to a chair. Some accounts of his ignoble end have him still bound to the stool as he dangled on the hangman's hemp - the executioner swinging on his ankles to snap his neck and hasten his undignified demise. In Spring of 1996, I damaged my leg while directing a performer in the soon-to-open Stirling Old Town Jail, which replaced the Tollbooth prison in 1847. The building being in the last stages of renovation, I had to be tied to a chair and carried out of the penitentiary...just like Master Mair. A big fan of irony, I decided to include Allan into that year's *Stirling GhostWalk* script. I wasn't supposed to be performing that year - I was far too busy co-ordinating '*Living History*' drama programmes in St Andrews, Ayr and Dundee - but ended up filling-in on the first night when the lead actor suffered stage fright. No problem: by this point my leg had healed...or so I thought. Lurking in the shadows as Mair, towards the end of the evening's second show, I stood up... and shuddered as the bones of my knee scissored through part of my previously damaged ligament. To cut a long story short, I decided to finish the show (the show *must* go on, don'cha know!), and was tied to a chair and carried by my patient punters - tied to a chair borrowed from an obliging local - to the finale...dramatizing Alan Mair's execution. Art imitating Life? Perhaps.

Holder notes in *The Guide To Mysterious Stirlingshire* that Mair's haunting of the Tollbooth seems to have diminished since he became a regular on the Ghost Tours (though appearing in three out of twenty scripts is hardly 'regular', and – for those inclined to believe in such matters – his corpse being removed from it's unconsecrated plot under a step in the old prison and relocated in an unmarked plot in the Holy Rude churchyard might have something to do with his 'absence' from his former prison). He tells, too, of a local postman, alarmed to be greeted with a gruff "*Good morning!*" issued from a Victorian wraith one misty morn, near the entrance to the old courthouse – though he doubts whether manky old Mair would be so civil.

He's right.

It was *me*...garbed as Prison Inspector, Frederick Hill, taking a short-cut back to the Old Town Jail from the corner shop in Broad Street. It's not my storytelling that makes me a part of the recorded legend and lore of the Old Town, it seems, but my idiosyncratic choice of working attire...and an easily spooked Postie.

It had to happen *eventually*, I suppose...

SATURDAY NIGHT SPECIALS

I always liked Saturdays, when I was a kid. Especially in the Summer.

For most of my peers, steeped in the happy-clappy culturally-approved Caledonian sociopathy of sectarian soccer-fandom, Saturday was a day to don their tribal colours and hurl abuse (and anything else that came readily to hand) at one another from the terraces. If asked to say what it was, exactly, that doctrinally divided them, they would greet such earnest enquiries with stupefied glares. They worshipped the same God, didn't they? *God*? What the Hell had *God* got to do with anything? This wasn't about concupiscent contentions over the Personal Covenant or the validity of the Apostolic Succession. This was about *Rangers and Celtic*, the *Blue and the Green*, the ritualized embodiment of centuries of factional in-fighting and good ol' fashioned *Hate*. This was about *Football*.

Faith and Football: *Welcome To Scotland!* I never grasped the appeal of either. Mind you, my befuddlement over the Beautiful Game was as nothing compared to the awe-struck incomprehension which met my oft-stated disdain for it. '*What team do you support?*' was playground parlance for '*What religion are you?*' - answer to which would determine which side of the park and which group of couthy quots you spent your Summer days with. A strict division, save for those hours occupied by their favourite games – *Football* and *War*. It was often difficult to divide one from the other.

To respond that I didn't support *any* team confused the poor brats. It defied their nascent cognizance of the crude mechanistic clockwork of the universe - like saying that I didn't believe in *Gravity*. When, after many a taunting poke, prod or punch in the mouth

- by which, presumably, they aimed to emulate the Inquisitors of old, and prompt a blubbing confession of my *True Faith* - they realized I was sincere, I was finally left in peace - a freak, more to be pitied than reviled.

Poor me? Nah. Actually, I have a lot to *thank* Football for.

I sulked for a while, of course, but soon sought solace in stranger company – courtesy of BBC2's regular Movie Matinee. Here I first made the acquaintance of *Zorro*, *Raffles*, *Matt Helm*, Margaret Rutherford's fussy *Miss Marple*, Jimmy Stewart's *Elwood P. Dowd* (and his pal *Harvey*, of course), went *On The Road* with Messrs Hope and Crosby, discovered Bogey's carnaptious cool, and delighted in the wayward wit of Billy Wilder. From Ealing comedies to White-Hat Western heroics - the world was a braver, bolder, more blustorous and beautiful place on Saturdays.

It wasn't until I saw the Mothership tower over me at the Glasgow Odeon, during a screening of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1978, that I was truly 'turned-on' to movies – when I discovered there was a profound difference between 'film' and 'cinema' - but my schooling in movie matters began during my childish exile on those wet weekend afternoons. By the age of ten I was convinced that Alec Guinness was a bona-fide genius, Donna Reid was the most beautiful creature on the planet and John Wayne was only *really* any good if John Ford had his name on the credits of his pictures (my opinions on these points haven't altered in more than three decades).

After the (slightly subversive) interlude provided by *Play Away*, some show about a beatnik with a big blue box and a penchant for polystyrene planets, and the unsavoury collation of un-PC prejudices which passed for 'family fare' during that decade, it was time for my *real* Summer treat. As *Sportscene*'s boorish cheers sullied the stillness of the night, on BBC Scotland, it was time – one knob down - for Auntie Beeb's seasonal fright-fests to commence.



Classy Classic Horror

(c) Universal Studios

Each Saturday from May to September for more years than I can remember, BBC2 would broadcast an episode of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* or Phil Silver's *Sgt Bilko* (which remain firm favourites in their own rights), as tasters for the evening's macabre main-course. First of all we'd have a true classic of monochromatic menace: a Universal horror - Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), perhaps, or *The Invisible Man* (1933) – Todd Browning's still daring *Freaks*, (1932)) or *Them* (1954),. Then, for pudding, a Technicolor terror - a Hammer horror, an Amicus anthology or a more contemporary exercise in visceral vapidty, such as the deliriously earnest beast-bunny flick, *Night of The Lepus* (1972). I preferred the sinister stylings of the older films, which - though admittedly about as frightening as the Duracell Bunny - demonstrated far greater invention and visual verve than their *cut-throat and cleavage* successors. Valerie Leon's charms in *Blood From The Mummy's Tomb* (1971) were...um... *conspicuous*, but even *then* I knew that her 1932 predecessor, *The Mummy's* Zita Johann, inhabited a stranger and more beguiling underworld - largely because earlier efforts were more inclined to encourage audiences fully to engage their *own* imaginations in determining what dangers *really* dwelled just out-of-shot in the darkness of their cinematic shadowlands.

Breasts are *great* - I'm a *fan* - but *brains* are better.

Not convinced? Consider, then, the palpable menace endured by nightswimming Jane Randolph in Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942), as she is suddenly stalked by the hitherto utterly unthreateningly petite poolside personage of Simone Simon - and compare it with the sloppily sanguinary sexual slathering's of Schraeder's 1982 remake. Despite the latter boasting the tasty teenage tush of a nude Nastassja Kinski, a staggering body-count and a contrivedly sensationalist incest sub-plot, it's the former, where dangers are implied but rarely literalized, which makes the lasting impression - established my view that free-flying entrails are the last resort of lazy film-makers who lack the talent required to create atmospheric frights.

Summer Saturdays fuelled my filmic fandoms. Looking at my DVD and video collections, the flickering fancies first encountered on those dreary days (and nights) remain well represented: a constant delight which might not have been mine had it not been for bloody Fitba'.

SIDEKICKS

As I said a few columns back, I realised long ago that I wasn't really Hero material. I'm not exceptionally smart, I'm woefully unfit and...well...I lack the luck or lugubrious *laissez-faire* of a Pulp gumshoe. I *could* always be a sidekick, of course: expectations of them are never *quite* so high.

But which kind?



Holy Pixie-Boots, Batman! (c) DC Comics

First up is The Foil. Decent chaps, Foils - reminding us how dynamic or driven the hero *truly* is. *Doctor Watson* and *Sergeant Lewis* are the most obvious examples of this breed: 'obvious' being the key word. They see the world as we do – senses subsumed by the superficial and the commonplace – but do not perceive it's particular peculiarities as The Hero can. They usually share similar backgrounds or attitudes to the author and audience. We can never *be* Holmes, but *can* relate to the mundanity of *Watson* - or *Lewis*, or the numerous DCs and DSs who accompany the Rebuses and *Wexfords of the world* – professional, experienced, and able to relate directly to the world in ways the lofty Heroes cannot. Foils ground the heroes, and think 'us' shaped thoughts - asking just the right questions to keep *us* in the loop.

I could do that.

An off-shoot of The Foil is that almost exclusively comic trope, The Kid sidekick. *Robin* rules *this* roost. Introduced (in *Detective Comics* #38, 1940) to attract aspirant adventure-hounds (pups?) to comics, he doubled sales of *Batman* and *Detective Comics*. He was sufficiently popular, too, to earn that rarest of sidekick-accolades – his own feature - first taking solo-flight in 1947's *Star Spangled Comics* #65, though it would be another forty-four years before he earned his own book. *Sandy the Golden Boy*, *Bucky*, *Kid-Flash*, *Speedy*, *Aqualad*...kids were the heroic accessory *du jour*. Silver Age Marvel's *Rick Jones* sidekicked...well...just about *everybody*, at one time or another – most memorably *Bruce Banner's Hulk*. *Jones* thus combined the fun aspects of the youthful adventurers who came before him with a dynamic contrast, both to the genius of *Banner* and the dark monstrosity of *The Hulk*: a comics *Uuber-Foil*.

Of course concepts of child endangerment all but killed The Kid. The deaths of *Captain America's* pal *Bucky* in Marvel continuity and the brutal murder of the second *Robin* in *Batman: A Death In The Family* (1988-89), were both pivotal to the gratuitous

grittification of their publishers' heroic continuities – becoming *sources* of darkness rather than relief *from* it.

But that's by-the-by – I'm too old, fat and bald to be a Kid Anything...and I can't kick for shit.

Then come The Fixers. *Batman's Alfred*, *Zorro's Bernardo*, *Lord Peter Wimsey's Bunter* – medics and manservants, father-confessors, keepers of secrets, and essential tools in maintaining the division between heroic and private personas. *Albert Campion's Magersfontein Lugg* is no less faithful than these gentlemen's gentlemen, but is – thanks to the democratisation of the gentleman-detective biz – rather less *servile*. His role is less clear, too. He's part pal, part partner – and Alfred Pennyworth would be awestruck at his table-manners. He bridges the gap to the next group of Fixers – those who are sharper, stronger or otherwise provide a vital skill-set the hero lacks. *Spock*, *Archie Goodwin*, *Chewbacca*, *Modesty Blaise's Willie Garvin* – heroic in their own rights, but still essentially there to serve the protagonist. Interestingly, many of these characters are of a different race or background to the hero, and their relationships are fundamentally *friendship* rather than *role-based*. Is egalitarianism the heart of heroism? Maybe. TV hard-man Callan's loathed his malodorous but necessary Fixer, Lonely, but he was the nearest thing to a friend he had.

I don't pong, thankfully, and I'm not particularly handy with gun, knife or Dilithium Crystal, so I'm out here, too.

The Comedians, next. From *Charlie Chan's* eye-rolling black driver *Birmingham Brown* (superbly elevated beyond caricature by Mantan Moreland), to *Wonder Woman's* chubby chum Etta ("Woo! Woo!") *Candy* and her *Holliday College* posse, the Golden Age *Green Lantern's* 'Doiby' *Dickles* and *Plastic Man's* 'Woozy' *Winks*, there's nothing that makes a hero look quite so spectacularly spiffy as a pratfalling pillock. *The Tick*, Alan Moore's *First American* and – of course – *Hong Kong Phooey* work because the balance of competence is satirically shifted. The gag just wouldn't *work* if *Arthur*, *US-Angel* or *Spot* were the stars: It's not just about heroism, their about providing heroic archetypes.

I'm not woozy or cute, and deign to doff my *Doiby* for anyone, but I *am* arse-numbingly accident-prone. I'd fare well, here... Better, anyway, than in the *last* class of Sidekick - The Love Interest – traditionally dominated by Distressed Damsels like *Dale Arden*, *Vicki Vale*, *Margot Lane*, *Jane* (yes, we *know* the chimp was the real side-kick, but we don't want to offend the poor dear). Old School, I know. These days Sistahs – in theory, at least – are doin' it for themselves. But all *Alias*, *Buffy*, and *Xena* do is invert former sexism: their boys shriek just as loud.

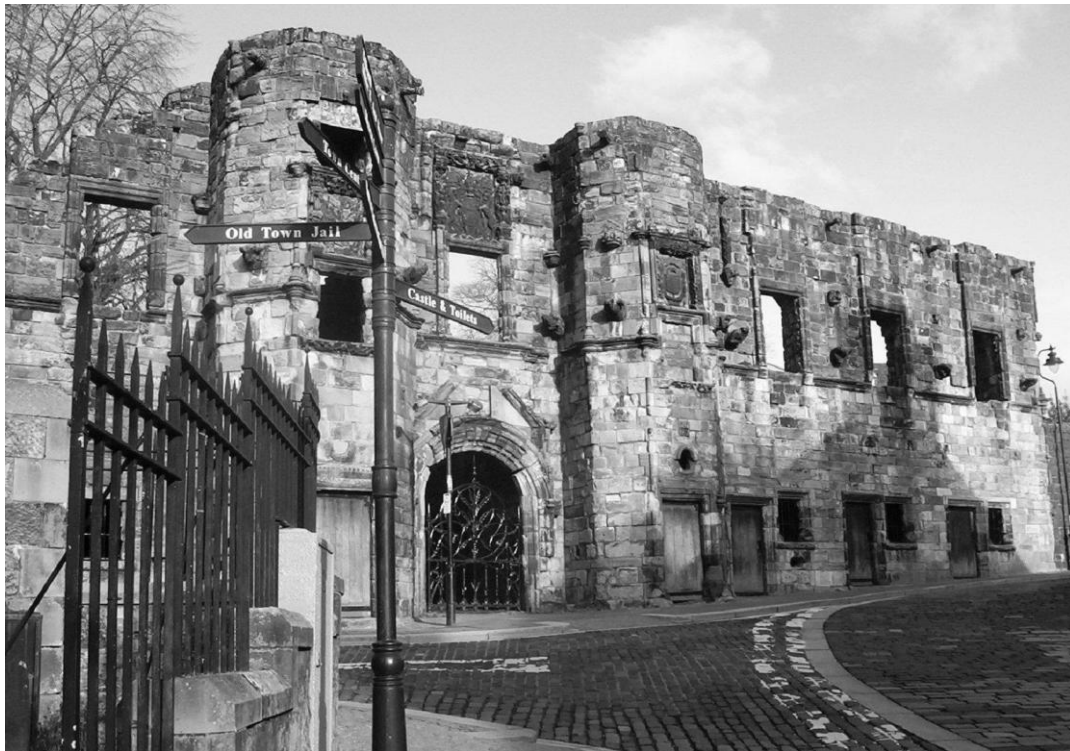
Outside of WAGs, *Sam Spade's Effie* and *Perry Mason's* Girl-Friday and all-round Fixer *Della Street* are all besotted with their beaus. For Non-Damsels, though, hero-sidekick romance is a *bad* idea. Sexual tension is good, but – as *The X-Files*, *Moonlighting* and *Lois & Clark* proved – *releasing* it scuppers emotional expectation and suspense. *Sarah-Jane Smith* was supposed to break the *Doctor Who* Damsel trend - a gamine go-getter

'70s gal, and effective Foil - but got tied-up and shrieked (and *how!*) just as much as every companion before...or since, and as soon as *The Doc* started falling for *Rose* you knew their days were numbered...which might explain why so much interspatial totty remained untouched by previous regenerations. What of the '60s TV show *The Avengers*, you say? Well, flirtations aside I don't think *Mrs Peel* or *Ms Gale* were *anyone's* sidekicks...and *Tara King* was crap.

I've gone off Sidekickery. As exercises in wish-fulfilment go they are all very well - providing us with a vicarious comprehension the heroic world, or an aspirant role-model - but my options seem limited to those of stooge-like Foil or ludicrous light relief.

Back to the drawing board.

MAR'S ATTACKS



We're DOOMED! Mar's Wark, Stirling

Dick Cheney once observed that "There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know." The aptly named *Dick* was, of course, talking shite -as only a man whose principal function on this earth is to make a strategically shaven chimp look good can. And yet I find that Dick had a *point* - at least in so far as my current historical inquiries are concerned. It's all politics, you see.

Take John Erskine, third Regent of Scotland during the infancy of King James VI: there are oh-so many things that we know about him.

His townhouse, Mar's Wark, loms over Stirling's Broad Street – it's crumbling crenelations all that remains of its founder's legacy. In 1542 John Erskine, personally escorted the six year old Mary, Queen of Scots to the safety of France during the destructive rampage of Henry VIII's 'Rough Wooing', loyally earning his title as 1st Earl of Mar in 1562 - along with the guardianship of the Queen's heir, the young Prince James, the year following her return from that country. Mary's forced abdication in 1567 increased his influence, and in 1571 he was appointed Regent – the *third* to bear that burden during the boy's infancy. A perilous appointment. Two regents had been bumped-off within the previous 18 months. The *first*, Queen Mary's half-brother James the Bastard (quite a nice chap, actually), was assassinated in 1570. The *second*, Matthew Stewart, 4th Earl of Lennox, the King's grandfather (and another brand of bastard entirely), was 'accidentally' shot by his own men.

The Wark's wide façade once stood three storeys high. It had a central gateway flanked by octagonal towers adorned with the coats of arms of Mar and his Countess. Courtiers, mermaids, gargoyles, mythological monsters and even – presumptuously adorning the upper gateway – the Royal Arms of Scotland vie for attention amid the ostentatious decorative pageant of its walls. There are curious quotes, biblical and poetic – and others more obscure in origin. A headless weatherworn figure on the north wall nearby the bound, surplice image known as 'Jeannie Dark' (who 'everybody knows' is Joan of Arc, but isn't), holds a book with an intriguingly cryptic inscription graven upon it's open pages: 'TRA TOVR TYM REVELLIT OVR CRYM' ('*Traitor Time revealed our crime*'). This is where the 'knowns' 'the known knowns' the 'unknown knowns' and the 'complete bollocks' converge. We don't have a flaming clue what it means...the decoration was never finished. Ah, but *that's* part of the tale, too. Those few words have been cited as proof of murder. Not just murder...infanticide....hell, let's go the whole hog and settle on Regicide. See, according to some Mar and the Wark itself were cursed before the first foundations were laid

T.F. Thiselton Dyer's delightfully cracked *Strange Pages From Family Papers* (1898) reports a 'commonly known' curse 'of great antiquity', delivered to Erskine:

'Proud Chief of Mar, thou shalt be raised still higher, until thou sittest in the place of the King. Thou shalt rule and destroy, and thy work shall be after thy name... Thy work shall be cursed and shall never be finished.... Then, when thou seemest to be highest, when thy power is mightiest, then shall come thy fall; low shall be thy head amongst the noblest of the people. Deep shall be thy moans among the children of dool [sorrow]. Thy lands shall be given unto the stranger, and thy titles shall lie among the dead...Thou, proud head and daggered hand, must dree thy weird, until horses be stabled in thy hall, and a weaver shall throw his shuttle in thy chamber of state...'

Astonishingly accurate in its chronicling of Erskine misfortunes. Received wisdom has it that it was Cambuskenneth's Abbot who uttered this 'Curse' because Erskine had 'commanded the destruction of Cambuskenneth Abbey, and took its stones to build himself a palace'. True. The Wark was never finished, serving as a barracks and stables

in the 17th-century and as Workhouse by the middle of the next. The opening salvo - *'thou shalt be raised still higher, until thou sittest in the place of the King'* - might refer to Mar's elevation from Guardian to Regent, but could equally apply to the local legend that Mary's heir had died - or been murdered - and been replaced by a bairn born of Erskine blood - that a Mar did indeed sit *'in the place of the king'*. Local coffin-dodgers swear blind that the skeleton of a baby - King James himself - was unearthed in the ruin within the lifetimes of their own parents or grandparents, and that its weeping - a tartan-tinted *'Tell-Tale Heart'* - can be heard at the site in dead of night. Funny how Royal Ghost-Sprogs sound a lot like shag-happy foxes.

Funny, too, that this epoch-altering discovery is unknown to historians? And what about the 'Curse'? It proves Mar's villainy. Bollocks. The clue, I think, is in the comment that *'a weaver shall throw his shuttle in thy chamber of state'*, a reference *not* to the Regent Mar, but to his dithering descendant, the Jacobite 6th Earl - known as *'Bobbing John'* 'cos his allegiances bobbed like a weaver's shuttle from Hanoverian to Jacobit, and cost the latter faction the Battle of Sherrifmuir (1715). *His* lands were *'given unto the stranger'*, and his titles revoked. The 'commonly known' ancient Curse is an exercise in *political spin*, written long after the events it described. Oh, and Cambuskenneth had been abandoned long before Mar nicked its bricks.

Still, these old tales have their uses. I often ask audiences to pause and listen for the sound of the weeping bairn as I finish my GhostWalks in the ruin. Many go pale with horror as they hear its plaintive cries. It must be true. Everybody knows.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

It's said, gentle readers, that our fair nation is afflicted by a terrible condition which seeps away our strength and vitality and wears upon our nerves. *Compassion Fatigue*. It's a contagion, spread by a legion of Typhoid Marys whose aggressive infestation of our city streets is resisted only by the most dogged and determined citizen, deaf to their insistent mantra *"Can I have a moment of your time...?"* Insults, stony silences and threats of impending pugilistic brouhaha do nought to deter these agents of that foulest of cultural calumnies...*altruism*. I mean, God forbid that the few moments it would take to become just a *little* more aware of another's woes should erode any tiny portion of our precious lunch hours. And the *cheek* of these Chuggers! It's almost as if their intrusive antics were in some part a response to the violence and vexation that routinely greets these street-working wastrels. But that *can't* be true, can it? We're so worn out by our willingness to do good. We've got *Compassion Fatigue*, after all. Poor us. Perhaps some kind soul will form a trust to save us from this urban blight.

Worse still are those that seize a cause du jour in order to raise their own profiles along with so-called 'awareness' of the world's ills. Bastards like that Geldof character whose egalitarian, altruistic Third-World zealotry masks a shameless promotion of his...um...well, okay, he hasn't actually *had* a musical career for the better part of two

decades, and he's not ever going to be a poster-boy for fashion or hair care...but you get the *idea*. Right?

Little Timmy wants to see Disneyland before he dies. '*Poor Little Timmy*', the cynic chuckles, '*I'd like to shag Megan Fox, but it ain't gonna happen!*' A new wheelchair, an access-ramp or an expensive experimental trial might make Poor Wee Debbie's days a bit more bearable. '*Pah!*' pouts the seasoned misanthrope '*I refer you to my previous answer!*' I mean, honestly, do these people think that someone whose experience of this world is so blighted brief should be encouraged to take delight in each tiny moment. Life's a bitch, kids (much like Megan Fox, apparently) – best get used to it. Too many needy causes. Too many worthy drains on our precious time and resources. I mean, most of this money goes to administration costs, or into the hands of grasping parents. Right? Eh?

The apposite response to such commentary is, of course, '*Go back to your Daily Mail you callous ****wad!*'

Yes, there *do* occasionally appear to be an alarming number of charity workers chirping cheerily on our street corners, but surely that's simply an acknowledgement that the institutions they represent have to be run in a businesslike manner, and use the same aggressive tactics to ensure that they are noticed and secure a nook in the marketplace? We lose count of the number of *Timmys* and *Debbies* who fleet fatally by in a temporary torrent of media-generated sympathy, their campaigns as brief, as their breath. But the minute we start thinking about charities as a *generality*, and not of the individuals they represent, then we lose sight of something critical. For most people a dedication to a particular 'good cause' is prompted by a personal tragedy or affliction, supported not because of an altruistic desire to better the lot of all mankind, but because it has played upon our most private emotions....which is why sustaining interest in more abstract enterprises, like, say, famine relief, is such an arduous and gimmick-inducing endeavour.

I'm no bloody different.

Heard of Turner's Syndrome? Me neither. It's a rare chromosomal disorder typified by cytogenetic abnormalities, which affects around one in two thousand women, making many prone to ovarian cancer. I only heard about it last year when the fourteen year old daughter of two dear friends collapsed during a school trip and was discovered to have a tumour the size of a small melon in her womb.

We buried her today.

Eilidh Brown was an astonishing young lady. Scrub that: Eilidh Brown *is* an astonishing young lady. Over the past year she endured the removal of both ovaries and part of her bladder, countless hours of chemotherapy and hair loss. The cancer spread to her liver and spinal column, but for all the pain, blood and shit life slung at her, she fought on. When her life-span was calculated in *days*, she wrestled them into *months*. When the comforting oblivion of unconsciousness beckoned, she dug in her heels, determined not

to (as some hack or other put it) *'go easy into that goodnight'*. She knew death was inevitable, but, for all her fear – and, Jesus, who wouldn't be afraid – she remained positive, giving her family and friends faith in the possibility of hope, and the strength to face her ultimate fate. In so doing she *was*, and *remains*, inspirational. Her loss will cause great grief – the depths of which *I* can barely grasp – but her legacy will remain with all who knew her.

A fighter, she helped establish the Eilidh Brown Trust to increase the odds of her survival, seeking treatments and trials often too expensive or experimental to be offered by the NHS, and therefor unattainable for normal families such as hers. Writing on the Trust's website Eiligh's aunt, the actress Simone Lahbib, wrote that this will become a memorial fund: *'I know that Eilidhs mum and dad want to do something very special in Eilidhs memory. Perhaps if there is enough money raised it could be used to help teenagers with cancer or other families who have children with cancer.'* That sounds like Eilidh's attitude: a young lady not to be underestimated. Inspiring by example. Fighting on.

Making us proud – and she set *that* bar high enough, herself.



Look at the face in this picture. That's not *'Another Cancer Kid'*. That's not *'This Week's Good Cause'*. That's Eilidh Brown. And don't *you* forget it.

Now, as Mr Geldof once so sagely said. 'Give us your ****ing money!'

UMMM....!

Bit embarrassing, this.

This column completes a year of merry missives on this forum. Fifty one essays which I hope have entertained and amused at least *some* of you – on the Beaver Book of Horror, Black Canary, Capes, Charity, Children, Christmas, Chuck Austen, collecting, Colley Cibber, comic fandom, Costums and Cosplay, Daniel Farson, Ditko, Forrest J. Ackerman, Frederick Wertham, Geekdom, the Golden Age Sandman, Hate, Henry Fielding, Heroes and the Heroic Ideal, Horror Movies, Indie publishers, It's A Wonderful Life, Local Mythology, Kitty Pryde, Metafiction, Modesty Blaise, Orson Welles, Porn, the Ratcliffe Highway Murders, Radio Drama, Reality, Santas (Real, Secret, and Surrogate), Satan, Sex and Horror, Sherlock Holmes, Sidekicks, Star Wars, Storytelling, Superman, Tolkein, Tourism, The Twilight Zone, Vampires and William Wallace, and...to be honest...I don't have a bloody clue what to write, this week.

I considered a look at the ways in which the character of Dracula – the real, historical Vlad Tepes, as opposed to the Bram Stoker fiction – has become assimilated into the character of the vampire amongst Indie comic wannabies. The brutal yet righteous warlord getting positively Medieval on the asses of urban crims, creeps and spooks...but I've had at least three Dracula columns, and god alone knows *how many* riffing on my favouritr four-colour funny-paper foible. I thought about a comparison of the characters and creators of Horatio Hornblower, Philip Marlowe and Bertie Wooster, and how alcoholism and the peculiar academic ethos of Dulwich College shaped the destinies of three very different forms of distinctly English gentlemen (despite one in each column being American, if only in name), or how Marlowe and Sam Spade, seemingly joined at the hip by being represented definitively on screen by Bogey, are actually clearly distinct – the more cynical and world-weary of the pair actually being the more morally steadfast – but I've done detectives and the Heroic Ideal to death. Another comic-character study? Too soon. One more wistful reminiscence of my morose and misanthropic youth? Not again, surely? I need to keep *some* secrets, after all. I thought about a musical thread, but I'm not really in a musical mood, and if I put on music in order to inspire me, I'll get distracted and I'll end up listening to Bjork or Billie Holiday or Gilbert and Sullivan (the most frequently censored theatrical partnership in British history...didn't know that, did you, eh?), and this bloody thing'll never get written.

Hum.

Not any further, am I?

See, that's the problem with a column like this. You really have to have something to say in order to make it worth writing, or, indeed, reading. A diversity of interests is great. I'll never be a polymath of Fryian proportions ('Meh!', I hear you say!), or an uncapped oilwell of originality, like Mr Moore, but like those great men, I do like to read about stuff. I like to learn, not because there is a point to acquiring random bits of information, but

because they *are* random. Sometimes they make up a bigger picture; sometimes the bits fit together in a bizarre and wacky abstract that makes satisfying sense only to myself, but the scattergun patterning is part of the pleasure. I love history, literature, film, folklore, poetry, puzzles, comics, biography, philosophy, theology and jam. I really like jam. I could, in all probability write a column about jam that would make me very happy indeed, but, lets face it, would you want to read 1000 words (illustrated) on my fondness for jam? Or Jute? Or Josie Long? A blog would be easier, of course, as a blog is 80% raw opinion, but I'm not big on blogs: '*What I've done/read/saw/shouted at or latched-over this week*', having been an English teacher, just seems like a homework exercise to me. And, dear me, but most blogs don't age well. They are, by their very nature, *of the moment*. After the gripe du jour is past, they rarely stand up to re-reading. Do these things I've been hoiking out here for the past year? I'm not sure. I hope I'm able to convey a little of my enthusiasm for various subjects – subjects, sometimes, which regular readers might have been utterly unaware of – and that a few of them might be worth looking at twice. I wonder, sometimes, though whether the patterns and puzzles which I delight in can really be conveyed, or whether sometimes you lot are wondering less '*Where does he get this stuff?*' and more '*Why does he bother?*'.

Ah, the insecurities of the hack.

Ha! I've done *that*, too.

It was suggested by one kind hearted soul that I package 'em up and flog 'em. A bit of vanity publishing. Nice thought, but that really poses the great publishing question...who is my 'market'? A lot of my chosen subjects are quite astonishingly random. How many people would expect to find an essay on 18th-century celebrity ****wit Colley Cibber on a site dominated by sci-fi, fantasy and horror (I could try a column about Tod Slaughter, sometime...)? And would an audience familiar with Cibber or Fielding or obscure 19th-century murder mysteries really give a tadpole's tadger for my musings on the cultural significance of the Death of Superman, or Modesty Blaise as the first truly feminist character in pop-culture? I don't think so. In many respects, I suppose, I'm engaging in intellectual masturbation: what I do amuses me tremendously, but what use it is to any bugger else is debatable. I exist in a Geek limbo – my outpt is too geeky for general consumption, and too mainstream for the geek-press.

'Oh, get on with it!', I hear you say.' There's usually some kind of point to these bloody rants of yours! When are you going to get to the punchline?'

Isn't one, I'm afraid, I'm just killing time, filling in while I struggle to think of something for next week. A study, maybe, in Procrastination and the Creative Impulse. There's an idea. Now where did I put my copy of 'Tristan Shandy'?

Ha! 1000 words. Gotcha!

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING

The intrepid ghosthunters crept warily through the crumbling crenellations of the ruined tower, shadows from their torches dancing like dark flame over the rough-hewn, weatherbeaten bricks. They stopped suddenly, peering into the drear, gloomy depths of the lower chamber at the narrow sliver of moonlight invading their domain through the narrow window bole, beyond.

This, they were sure, had been a place of intrigue. Of secret meetings and talk of violent deeds. The blood of one investigator chilled as the image of a man standing by the mirror seemed to impress itself upon her mind's eye: he was wearing woollen trousers and a short dark jacket – a uniform? - his long hair tied back from his face as he knelt by the window, his musket – at the ready. A guard, dedicated to the duty of his watch, ever mindful of danger lurking beyond the safety of his walls. Yes. There had been many soldiers here. Power and passion had played their part, she was sure, in impressing their persistent personal essence upon this lonely place. The ghosthunters' guide nodded knowledgeably, for the psychic spoke truth – and one of her colleagues had reported similarly soldierly impressions only a few minutes before her arrival.

Well, *duh!*



Spooky is as spoky does...or something! Holy Rude Kirkyard, Stirling

Reading through accounts of vigils undertaken by modern paranormal investigators, it is a mistake, I find, to read too much into such uncannily 'accurate' observations. . Yes, it is certainly true that Stirling Castle's Elphinstone Tower was, at various points during its history, home to soldiers stationed within that fortress, and *had* been used as a store for

gunpowder and munitions; officers quartered here would have plotted their campaigns and discussed tactics – most notably during the Cromwellian and Jacobite sieges of 1651 and 1746; the spectral soldier's dark woollen garb sounds not unlike an artillery pelisse of the era. That two teams of investigators should report roughly similar impressions is interesting – who knows, possibly even significant – but, really, how surprising is it, really. A tower in a castle, surely, could be assumed to be a defensive structure, if only from its exposed position near the outer wall – that's what towers and castles were fundamentally *for*, after all, and someone with even the most rudimentary knowledge of the history of Scotland – or Britain – during the 17th- and 18th-centuries might subtly and subconsciously layer associations and significances onto even the most mundane impression. Ah, you say, but what of little details like the ghostly gunman's distinctive costume? Ever seen an episode of *Sharpe* or watched *Kidnapped*? The vast majority of us may not know a great deal about specific historical details of particular periods, but we all absorb far more than we think from afternoon telly, re-runs and repeats of *Blackadder* and those tedious bloody *Blue Peter* skits about Marie Antoinette that used to be on every other week....even if that knowledge is restricted to the popularity of Pie Shops in Regency England.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that the ghosthunters were '*faking it*'. Not for a second. Having read their reports – and those of other like-minded sensitives – I have no doubt whatever that they are *utterly* sincere. Simply that the imaginative impressions they created may have been influenced the way they subconsciously '*read*' their environment, grafting layers of meaning onto their environment.

I do it myself. In reading the only account of a vigil which I found to be utterly without merit – the psychics in a haunted historic pub not far from the Castle occupying themselves with what I can only describe as childish parlour tricks, inviting the spirit-children they claimed were present to make their Electromagnetic Frequency Pulse meters 'spike', or sit on other investigators' knees to see if it made them cold (of course it bloody would, as the simple suggestion of temperature change will precondition them to the perception that that change would occur – that's *basic* psychology) – I found myself grafting my own knowledge onto a number of the psychics' comments. One sensed that soldiers had been in the building? Really – a garrison town? Surely not. Soldiers lying on the floor? Pissed soldiers – not *that* uncommon, really. Soldiers speaking *French*, though? Ah...well...that's different...Bonnie Prince Charlie's army, who held siege to the Castle in January 1746, had a lot of Frenchmen. They disastrously positioned guns on the exposed promontory of the Gowan Hill, so close that the Chevalier Gordon noted that the Redcoats could '*see even the buckles on our artillerymen's shoes*'. The Jacobites ruled the streets by bloody 'truck and drum', seizing whatever buildings they thought would give them advantage. Could thirsty troops resist a tactically tempting tavern? This pub, after all, was one of the nearest buildings to the hill, and might have barracked them, or been used to tend the sick and wounded after Major-General Blakeny called for Mirabel De Gordon to....

Whooooah!

See? I'm leapfrogging. My assumptions and associations – from an informed, culturally contextual, location-specific and historically aware perspective – are far, far worse than those I presumed the first ghosthunters I mentioned to be guilty of. Random details are sifted and filtered and the most tenuous connections made by my mind because – random as they are – they kinda sorta make sense. The mind makes order out of chaos. It creates patterns and where none exist we assume that they do.

We crow-bar our preconceived ideas and ideals into places they really were never meant to fit....only poke and prod them out again when the received wisdom of the ages changes. Many thought (and still think) Darwin a dangerous nutter. Others, conditioned by contemporary educational mores, think his Creationist critics are the merry mentalists. Majority perception and prejudice are as changeable as fashion. Maybe the Tower investigator *did* see a spectral sniper, and it's the taint of my own semi-scientific rationalist mindset that makes me sceptical of the subjective truth of her experience. Or not. Are her sensations delusions, assumptions, subconscious perceptions or of phenomena we don't yet understand.

'Truth' is in the eye of the beholder, innit?

SO WRONG IT'S RIGHT (SORT OF)

It's election time, again. Time for The Hangman to cease his street-corner growling at evangelicals, and start barring his doors and bolting his windows against invading electioneers. I get much angrier now than I used to, but find that I'm just as apathetic as the rest of the nation when it comes to actually doing anything about it.

All I can say is...thank God for the British National Party.

Not something you'd expect to hear from me? Let me explain.

Once gentle reader, I was that livin', breathin', walkin', talkin' cliché, *The '80s Student Lefty*. It was a good time to be political. Things were more clear cut. Enduring a bleakly Tory-benighted '80s undergraduacy was a little like living in a episode of *Dad's Army*. The good-guys, the well intentioned defenders of liberty, were easy to recognise: a band of dodderers - good natured but just a little ludicrous - and led by a balding ginger blowhard over-fond of the sound of his own voice. But Captain Kinnock and Sergeant Benn didn't have it their own way. ARP Warden Owen and his irritating accolyte, Verger Steele, were always trying dastardly schemes to get more space in the Church Hall. Then there was The Enemy. We always knew who they were – or at least we did up in 'North Britain', you southern Johnnies might have different ideas.

Fraulien Thatcher and her omnipresent parliamentary Obersturmführers were the villains. Industry killers, milk snatchers – but, despite their dominance and anti-democratic dogma, there was something almost reassuring in their moustache-twirling

wickedness. They confirmed and rationalised our prejudices against them. When the Tories allowed white South African Zola Budd citizenship so that she could compete for Britain in the Olympics (remember her? No? Well that's 'cos she bugged off home afterwards), simultaneously blocking the immigration appeals of more worthy or deserving non-caucasian citizens, it gave us something to moan about – but it was *expected*. When they bettered the Luftwaffe's efforts in decimating British industry, we wagged our chins in woe, but we weren't surprised. Not a bit. When Maggie palled-up with Pinochet we sighed, but thought it fitting that an evil fascist dictator should...um... you can see where I'm going with this. Nuff said. '80s Labour might end up accidentally gassing themselves in the great metaphorical converted butcher's-van of Parliament, but you knew that their hearts were in the right place. They hated Maggie. That was almost enough to win our hearts.

And *how* we hated Maggie. 'That Bloody Woman'. As a student I did Dr Martens proud, marching my way through boot after boot - for civil liberties and against the Poll Tax, chanting myself hoarse on many a picket-line and protest, earnestly tub-thumping my little heart out through debate after debate, sure of the virtue of my egalitarian, meritocratic, democratic ideals. No prime minister in history has generated quite so much bile as Maggie, in Scotland. In her heartlands, the non-industrial South, its difficult for people to realise just how much she was hated, real, seething learn-every-line-of 'Tramp The Dirt Down' hatred, at that. From her election in 1979 the Caledonian Conservatives went into a tailspin. Realising that her Stukker was going to get shot down anywhere past Carlisle, she turned Scotland into a bombsite – a testing ground for all manner of 'initiatives' and social experiments – we got the sodding Poll Tax before it was re-fashioned as the Community Charge - then wondered why the ranks of Tartan Tories thinned out at every national and council election. By 1997, there were none left – Maggie's lasting legacy up here. Well, not quite. Through a process of selective breeding they released one into the wild, last election-time (that's David Mundell, folks – being unique hasn't made him memorable), though he's not expected to survive.

But...something happened. Sometime between Michael Foot (a good, decent man, but too much of a gentleman for Westminster) hanging up his duffelcoat for the last time and the death of John Smith, something else died. Looking for a more mainstream, prime-time audience, *Neil's Army* was given a multi-platform media-makeover. The shabby uniforms were gone, as were the Church Hall meets, and the ragged ribbons and rosettes replaced – along with little things like 'policies' and 'ideals' – by banners and motivational speeches. 'Who Do You Think You Are Kinnding, Mrs Thatcher' was dropped and a new theme-tune, '*Things Can Only Get Better*', was on DJ Tony's jukebox. Every time it played all I could hear was '*The Future Belongs To Me*'. Blair always seemed to me like the oily tick Rick from *The Young Ones* would grow up into.



Arse

Forget sit-com metaphors. We now live in a celebrity game-show. Trying to find out what any of these bastards actually believe in is almost as infuriating as listening to their meaningless soundbite-savvy platitudes as they take the path of least resistance at every sodding turn. They line up like cheap comedians. 'I met a black man in Bradford...' says one. 'I spoke to a Muslim in Manchester...!' says another. 'Three Lib-Dems walked into a bar...it was the Party Conference!' says the one we still can't quite recognise. Just to show they are 'in touch'. They're not. They are so steeped in 'spin' that they wouldn't know a genuine sentiment if it spat them in the face. Which it might. Which I might.

And through the mists of all this homogenous humbug comes the BNP and it's self-styled saviour of Britain, Popeye the Nazi Man. Nick Griffin. Thing is, he might be. His policies and ideologies are contemptible, morally bankrupt, culturally divisive and socially destructive. That the BNP can become 'players' is a warning to us all – to Compo, Clegg and Foggy, most of all – of what happens when zealots and halfwits are able to turn their complacency and homogeneous hypocrisy into hatred, and prejudice using no other tool than pointing out that our leaders aren't listening. They are also complete and utter c***s. They remind us what is worst in every bloody one of us. People can unite against them, because, once more, The Enemy has a face.

Thank God for the BNP.

LITTLE MISS GOODY-GOOD

It goes against the grain. In my heart I know it's wrong, and that every cynical, rational, world-weary bone in my body should rail against it. Aside from anything I'm not actually sure it's natural, and I may run the risk of outing myself and earning the corn of my prurient peers. But, dammit, I will not deny what dwells within my heart and soul.

I'm a little bit in love with Josie Long.



This is a crisis of Shakespearean proportions. I am the leading man (of course): the grumpy, carnaptious Romeo, ever eager to revel in the dire delights of misanthropic mirthmeisters from Hancock to Hicks – whose humour was, as Ambrose Bierce boasted in *The Devil's Dictionary*, based on an acknowledgement that Man was '*An animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be. His chief occupation is extermination of other animals and his own species, which, however, multiplies with such insistent rapidity as to infest the whole habitable earth...and Canada*' – or, as the late Mr Hicks rather more succinctly put it, '*a virus in sneakers*'. Long is...well...gregarious. A jolly Juliet.

I don't *do* 'jolly'. The 'Happy' bit in my internet *nom de plume* is ironic. Don't get me wrong, I am a generally well-intentioned chap, obliging, community spirited and socially responsible – but I embrace my Inner Grump. At heart I know that stoic pessimism is the basis of a healthy worldview. If things are a bit shit and people behave in a petty, selfish, hateful fashion...like *people*, basically...then the Grump can nod his head, his expectations confirmed, and get on with life, smugly secure of his superiority. If things go well, then that's fine too, as he gets to be pleasantly (and genuinely) surprised. Even when I don my seasonal colours and hold court in Santa's Grotto I don't *do* 'jolly': those that misbehave in my presence are faced with the distinct possibility that Godfather Christmas will make 'em an offer they can't refuse.

Long, though, is happy, eager to please, optimistic and full of – Gods help us – *joi de vivre*. She started as a stand-up at fourteen, winning the BBC New Comedy Award three

years later. Cheerful *and* young! If she was an evangelical Tory Chuck Austen fan, too, then she's be everything I despise. She makes Anthea sodding Turner seem taciturn. She performs shows with titles like '*Kindness and Exuberance*', '*Trying Is Good*' and '*All The Planet's Wonders*'. She giggles – GIGGLES, Goddammit! – with glee as she relates how her relentlessly cheery demeanour, even after being *mugged*, led a policeman to ask a friend if she might, just possibly, be...you know...a bit *simple*. She sees charity shops as treasure troves, each little trinket or china doggie not merely the displaced *memento mori* of a lost life or experience, but a source of mystery. She venerates history's heroic failures; the crap, talentless enthusiasts and obsessive-compulsives who do what they do not through a yearning for fame, fortune or glory but because they have a passion for their chosen pastime. Amateurs rank highly in Ms Long's world: '*amateur*' is French for '*lover*', she argues, '*professional*' is French for '*bum idiot*'.

And she *means* it. Dear Gods! I *should*, by all expectations, want to batter her to death with the collected works of my favourite literary misanthrope, William Faulkner. For all my love of the movies of Mike Leigh, Sally Hawkins' Poppy in *Happy Go Lucky* (2008) – described in the promotional material as 'a cheery, colourful, North London schoolteacher whose optimism tends to exasperate those around her' – made me want to nuke North London. I don't think I could bring myself to book-batter young Josie, though, as she'd probably just giggle again...and read the books, or engage me in a discussion about *her* favourites. She has *lots* of favourite books. She makes lists, and has been known in her act to segue from some socially-dysfunctional surrealist rant about train journey reading being interrupted by obnoxious beer drinking yobs ("*What you got? A newspaper? Ha! I got the threat of violence! Gotcha!*") into musings on whatever bit of Huxley or De Tocqueville she happens to be enthusing over at the time.

She does a lot of enthusing, does Josie.

To be *honest*, though, I think that's why I love her.

There appears to be nothing artificial or contrived about her enthusiasm. However silly her self-sketched illustrations of '*Small Things I Like*', you never for one second suspect that that silliness is anything less than sincere. When she says that 'trying is good' she means it. When she celebrates 'kindness and exuberance' she does it with all her heart. She said with regard to her first Edinburgh Festival gig that she had one objective: to 'disarm the cynics', and she did. Even Mr Miseryguts himself, Stewart Lee, has had his bitter, black heart brightened by her. Anyone who can start a feature on Radio One – '*Josie Long's Confuse the Teacher Feature*' – whose sole function is to introduce an odd word into the homework of the nation's youth liable to bemuse their tutors, is okay in my book. Improving kids' vocabulary *and* winding up Teach? Now that's subversive. When she drifts off into yet another cheery celebration of Nye Bevan (not a character likely to feature in increasingly tiresome tirades of 'Mock The Week') you know it's because she is an enthusiast. She's a Geek, proud of the fact – and carries her audience away on a beguiling tide of ego-free glee...like Harvey the Pooka's pal, Elwood P. Dowd. I suspect Josie Long may actually *be* a Pooka.

A humanist, Lefty, English Lit graduate – hell, she even likes comics – Ma Long makes me smile. She has worn away my cynic's heart and reminded me that glib *bon mots* and *shock-tactic satire* are the easy comedic response to life's little troubles. To remain cheerful and funny...that takes talent. To make an obvious intellect and giddy girlish imagination infectious does too.

She's cute, as well.

ORCS-R-US

Way back in the dolorous days when such matters occupied my mind on a regular basis, I became acquainted with T.S.Eliot's notion of the '*objective correlative*' – an image, causal action, character or situation whereby the reader's response to and understanding of a literary text is suddenly focused. The object or action in question provides a focal point for our recognition of the organic unity of the prose or poetry in question, adding dimensions of dramatic irony and tension which, according to Eliot, the author might not have consciously intended. It's a fairly logical argument, given that our responses to any work of art are entirely personal, often hinged on specific details of emotionally resonant syntax or imagery. Dennis Potter often commented that cheap songs – the disposable, artistically unremarkable pop-ditties we grow up with – often have a potency that 'high art' can't dream of. More couples, I'd hazard to guess, would claim Bryan Adams' excruciating 1991 '*(Everything I do) I Do It For You*' – or Jason Donovan's cringeworthy cover of '*Any Dream Will Do*', even - than any aria from Philip Glass's opera *Orpheus*, composed in the same year, as '*Our Tune*' simply because the unchallenging simplicity of sentiment in the former works is more explicit and direct – and determined by our own experience. Glass's work is more challenging, more complex and – on close examination – much more satisfying, but it doesn't deliver the ol' *one-two* punch like it's pop pap contemporaries...which is what makes pop '*Pop*'; we layer meanings and significances onto art and respond to it according to our own predispositions and prejudices, rendering it capable of a multiplicity of meanings... which is what makes art '*Art*'.

Okay, lit-crit lesson over. Sort of. I wanted to make the point that the significances of characters, incidents or images in fiction often exist in a subjective real devolved from authorial intent before directing your attention to the funniest website I know. It's not meant to be funny, admittedly, and it's humour is often (ironically...again, unintentionally) rather *dark*, but it makes me smile.

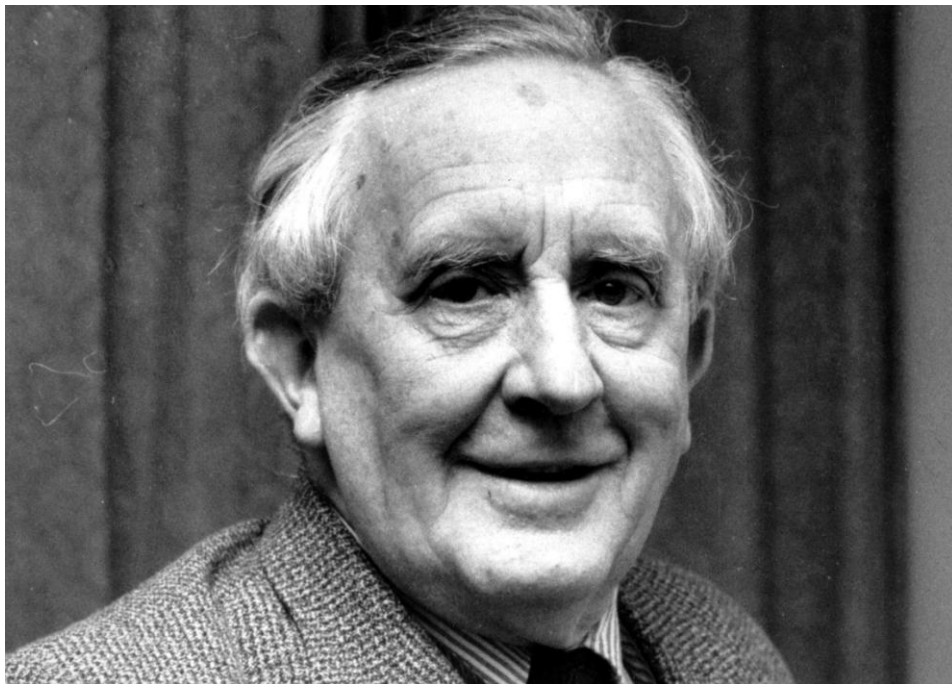
I speak, of course, of Stormfront the '*White Nationalist Community*' – and, more particularly, of it's 'Culture and Customs' forum where members debate matters musical, artistic and literary in their own *unique* way.

Sometimes the funnies are obvious. Threads with titles like '*Because the Beauty of the White Aryan Woman must not perish from the Earth*', '*Hollywood – Hebrews Hate*

Human Civilization’ and the quite splendidly bizarre ‘Beyonce’s Masonic Satanic Choreography’ are quite marvellous. ‘I WAS A HUGE BEYONCE FAN! I THOUGHT SHE WAS THE BOMB. THEN THIS STUFF GAVE ME A WAKE UP CALL’, bellows the author of the last thread (it’s verely SHOUTY, is Stormfront). ‘REMEMBER WHEN HE WAS STILL IN HEAVEN, SATAN WAS THE “ANGEL” OF MUSIC...’ (er...I must have missed that bit on The Lightbringer’s CV) ‘...Jay-z’s backtracked music has the lyrics quite clearly. He says “MURDER MURDER JESUS”. They are Satanists. Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Chris Brown, Beyonce...the whole lot of them! MAY GOT PROTECT US ALL AS WE CERTAINLY LIVE IN AN AGE OF DECEPTION!’

Well, yes. Yes, we do. *Deception* and, indeed, shrieking delusional mentalism. Let’s not ignore the ‘*mentalist*’ factor in balancing artistic intent with personal response.

The *real* fun comes in their examination of pop culture, particularly fantasy. *Kick-Ass* is described as ‘*little Jew children running around in tight*’. Robert E. Howard is ‘*clearly*’ in their camp, racially, as blacks, Mexicans and other non-whites are often so consistently described so negatively, particularly in his tales of Puritan adventurer Solomon Kane – despite pretty much *no-one* Solomon meets of *any* race being particularly pleasant, and his only real friend being N’Longa – an African witch-doctor. A black Beowulf provokes shrieks of Aryan outrage. Black and – *oh sweet Jesus, no* – gay characters in ‘Dr Who’ lead to imminent self-immolation (he’s a two-hearted illegal alien, you f***wits!)



Mr T. I pity the fol who thinks he had Nazi sympathies

In raising a ‘*Question about Lord of the Rings and White Racial Unity*’ – and LOTR is very popular on Stormfront - one poster is concerned about the positive representation of inter-race co-operation – leading up to a (ugh!) *mixed-marriage*. Don’t worry, comes the earnest reply, it’s all sub-textual: ‘*There’s nothing multicultural about it, in fact if you watch the movies (or read the books) you get the impression its a bunch of white men*

destroying the dark mongrel hordes. Well, yes, you *do*...if you are an *arsewipe* - as that reading goes against the whole Arwen/Aragorn Beren/Luthien thing, the friendship between Gimli and Legolas and little details like Tolkien's describing racist ideologies as *'wholly pernicious and unscientific'* and his response in 1938 to a German publisher's query as to his ancestry that *'if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people.'* (he instructed his agent to let the proposed German edition of *The Hobbit* 'go hang').

Eurocentric he most certainly was – the northern European cultures, languages and mythologies he was familiar with as a philologist provided the principle fabric from which his fictional realms were drawn, but his understanding of myth *informed* his sense of cultural awareness...and delusion. He wrote to his son, in 1941, *'You have to understand the good in things, to detect the real evil...I suppose I know better than most what is the truth about this 'Nordic' nonsense. Anyway, I have in this War a burning private grudge—which would probably make me a better soldier at 49 than I was at 22: against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler ... Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light.'*

Hmmm. Writing during WW2 of a evil force trampling the diverse races of Middle Earth under it's heel, defeated only by faith, friendship and racial/cultural co-operation...I wonder if there was an underlying metaphor or *'objective correlative'* there that certain irony-free f***tards might have missed?

EVENIN' ALL!

It's not like CSI, you know. Real life, I mean. Oh no.

The Grissolm gang always find just the right spatter of bodily fluids, the most revelatory fabric sample or anomalous microscopic mote in the nick of time, allowing Las Vegas's Finest to come a-knocking on the bad guys' doors within the hour. With New York you get added angst, and in Miami the ginger grump distracts us from procedural formalities of investigation (why does every bloody TV tec or techie have to be a 'maverick?'), but the set up is the same. In ages past Sherlock could calculate the time of murder by the depth a sprig of parsley had sunk into a knob of butter on a hot day, or trace a culprit through the unique properties of cigar ash discovered at the scene of the crime. Poirot was more instinctive, and Robbie Coltrane's Fitz, in *Cracker* would find the cause and consequence of dark deeds through the scientific, forensic dissection of a subject's psychology. Sometimes the 'tec just has a *'feeling'*, a *'hunch'* which goes utterly against the available evidence. Idris Elba's *Luther* is one such driven soul, plagued by the burden of proof in bringing the villain down...sorry..*dahn!* *"You can't prove a negative!"* boasted his nascent nemesis. Oh, but he *can*. And *will*. That's fundamental to the satisfaction of detective fiction. Did these bastards never watch *Columbo*?

Not like that, real life.



I got mugged last week. I was coming home from a *GhostWalk*: following my usual quiet route home from the graveyards of Stirling's Old Town. It was still light, and I didn't think twice about ducking into a narrow alleyway between streets – a regular short-cut. There were CCTV cameras on both streets, no-one – no-one *obvious*, anyway – on the path, and I was confident, based on past experience, that I could growl away any silly sod who thought to try it on or otherwise part me from my money-pouch. I scare people professionally, after all.

Unfortunately for me, the arc of one camera ended just short of the alley entrance, and that of the other started at it's exit. I was proud of the fact that I could – and have, frequently – defended myself from unwanted attentions (I'm generally armed with a basket-hilted sabre and a bloody quarter-staff, after all), but Pride goeth before the proverbial fall: following the same route for years, garbed in 18th-century executioners' livery (distinctively odd even for Stirling on a Friday night) meant that my route and habits can be easily predicted. An easy target. A soft touch. A mug.

Two steps down into the alley I felt someone press in behind me, grabbing at the strap of my shoulder bag. Any relief I may have felt that the strap didn't snap was momentary, as the frustrated felon dunted my head against the wall and vanished – as infuriatingly quietly as they had appeared. Bruised and slightly bloody – though the adrenaline rush of shock and injured pride were my only real injuries, other than a few bumps and scratches. An investigative aficionado, I enjoy smugly observing the little details in detective dramas which I think will prove criminality and culpability. I'm rather good at it – right down to noticing the musical cues and clues which were regularly slipped into *Inspector Morse* and *Twin Peaks* to indicate the various villainies of key characters. Here, I had...nothing. I was embarrassed to admit that I was oblivious to my surroundings. Stupidly complacent, given that I was an obvious target carrying cash.

Then the forensic stuff started. I gave a statement. My money bag and weskit were taken away for examination finger-printing and DNA testing. The alleyway was blocked off with crime-scene tape and examined. My injuries were logged and, the following day, photographed. I gave cheek-swabs to eliminate my physical data from enquiries. Only after all of this, of course, did I realise that I had given over fairly important parts of my costume and kit, and wasn't likely to get 'em back any time soon, as – understandably – forensic examination of more serious incidents will take priority over what is termed a 'volume crime'...the sort of anonymous, commonplace act which never makes it into the annals of crime fiction. The irony here is that although my robbery was unsuccessful as an act of theft, replacing the items in question even in the short-term will cost me far more than robbery would have. I almost wish the thief had succeeded – as then there would be a good reason for me ending up out of pocket. Grrrr.

I have to say that while I encountered no maverick criminological geniuses as a result of my assault, I did not, either, find the disdainful, cynical attitude so regularly attributed to the boys in blue – or black, in Scotland, the 'wooly suits' as they are often termed. Constables Wynn and Evans who dealt with me were never less than courteous and considerate, making every effort to put me at my ease, escorting me safely home and urging that I seek medical assurance of my wellbeing.

Is there a lesson here. Yup. Aside from my learning not to be a complacent silly-ar-se, and that a confrontational growl is not a good defence when someone comes at you from behind, this experience reminds me that there is drama – and embarrassment, shitloads of embarrassment – to be had in even the most mundane of crimes. Complex clues and conspiracies may lie at the heart of fictional policing, and may well play their part in the unravelling of real-life mysteries – but the cause, circumstance and resolution of most crimes – the 'volume crimes' which occupy most constabulary time - is largely down to the carelessness of victims. Something, again, which rarely makes it into fiction. This, of course – the unlocked door, the less-than-vigilant punter, the choice to take the risky but temptingly convenient short-cut – doesn't excuse the crime or the criminal, and it wouldn't make good telly.

It is, unfortunately, true.

Be careful out there.

A MODEST MAN

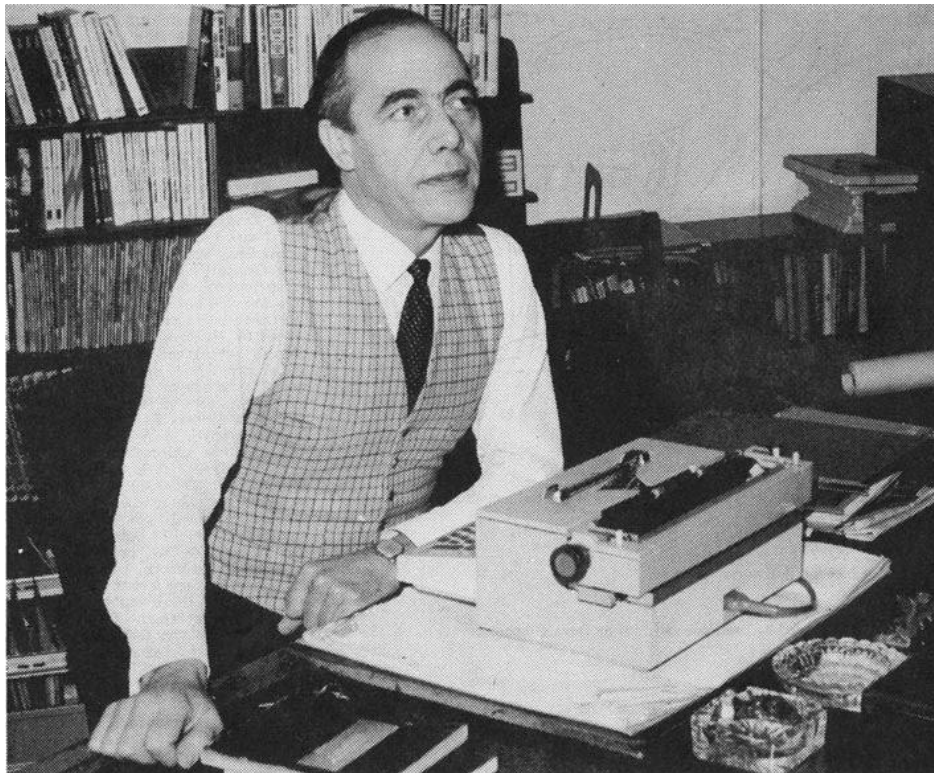
Modesty Blaise creator Peter O'Donnell dies, aged 90, earlier this month (3rd May 2010).

A prolific storyteller, both in strip cartoons and – as Madeleine Brent – as a writer of gothic romances, he had an astonishing and prolific career. Annoying, then, that his passing went largely unnoticed, and that many obit-writers made the mistake – one

which annoyed him tremendously in his lifetime – of calling his creation ‘the female James Bond’.

Bond had, of course, been an established comic-strip character, having appeared in the *Daily Express* for five years before Modesty first saw print, in 1963. O'Donnell himself scripted the 1960 *Dr No* strip, and was no stranger to two-fisted macho heroics, having worked on the superheroic *Garth* and devised the dapper detective *Romeo Brown* (where he first worked with Modesty's co-creator, artist Jim Holdaway) for the *Daily Mirror*. Modesty, though, bore little relationship with anything that went before.

A female protagonist - well, that was nothing new, surely? Hell, *Nancy Drew* had been getting into all manner of ‘chipper japes’ since 1930, and was still going strong. *Wonder Woman* had been fighting the good fight in her spangly patriotic pants for only a decade less. Modesty, though, was no Nancy or matron of monochrome virtue. She was a former war refugee, largely self-educated. She had been a thief, an information broker, and the head of The Network – an international criminal consortium whose only concession to virtue was that vice and narcotics played no part in their trade. Her trusty sidekick in these endeavours was Bible-quoting womaniser Willie Garvin: utterly devoted to his ‘Princess’ – who had bought him, ‘a hateful thug with a grudge against the world’, out of a Saigon jail and gives him purpose and genuine *joi de vivre* - but in a relationship founded on mutual respect, never on ‘sexual chemistry’. Respect is everything to Modesty. Thieves, warlords, Ministers and whores know that what ‘Mam'selle’ says is so is so, and that bad faith or betrayal of trust are those things most likely to earn her wrath.



The Modest Peter O'Donnell

Like Bond she and Willie can be violent. Lethal, sometimes – but never when other options are available. While they occasionally worked on behalf of Sir Gerald Tarrant's shady Whitehall spookshow, it was as private – unpaid – citizens, without the convenient License to Kill excusing Mr Bond's brand of state sanctioned sadism: their obligations were to themselves, alone.

As with Bond, sex was an issue. Aware of her allure, she occasionally employed 'The Nailer' - surprising her foes by appearing topless or nude, and taking the opportunity presented by their awestruck silence to...well...nail them (or for Willie to do so with his trusty throwing knives). Oddly this tactic never comes across as sexist, as the 'joke' is entirely at the expense of those who cannot see past her appearance. She is – by the standards of the time – promiscuous, but there always seems to be a genuine affection between her and her partners. Sex for modesty can be recreational, comforting or redemptive. Mr Bond's attitude was...um...rather less *enlightened*.

Bolstered by Bond, Hollywood came a-calling. In 1965, O'Donnell submitted a screenplay based loosely around elements of early strips – notably '*La Machine*' - to 20th Century Fox. The result was one of the cult-camp classics of the era, a sometimes surrealistically dire dayglo romp which incorporated, the writer claimed, only *one* line of dialogue from his script. Evan Jones utterly missed the point of characters, developing a romance between Blaise and Garvin, and granting the latter a more pro-active part in the unfolding action more appropriate to a big-screen action hero. Monica Vitti, on the other hand, stood around looking pretty but pointless. Well...that's what girls did in these films, wasn't it?

Not *this* girl, mate. Not *the Princess*.

Fleming's novels are efficient exercises in macho fantasy, but there's no depth to them, or to his hero. There is no sense of Bond having a personality not defined by the requirements of any given plot. He has no personality. He sneers, she shags, he shoots, he shuffles off to the next assignment. That's it. What sets Modesty Blaise and Willie Garvin apart from Bond – aside, of course, from *much* better writing - is that they have *heart*. We see them at rest – at Willie's pub, 'The Treadmill', with friends and lovers, enjoying food and art. They exist *beyond* the page. Exceptional, but never without humanity.

It's explained early on that the wayward war-child was briefly tutored by another refugee, a Hungarian scholar named Lob. He urged his charge – a girl with no knowledge of her origins – to choose herself a name. She took 'Blaise' – Merlin's tutor – and as she was shaped by Lob, she shaped Willie. *Respect*, again. *Dependency*. Touchingly, at the end of their bravest, boldest adventures, Modesty weeps at the thought of all that could – or has – gone wrong, showing her vulnerability only to the person she trusts and respects above all others. Her friend. Her '*Willie, love*'.

Could Bond be so raw? Does Bond really *have* friends?

'The female James Bond'? My arse.

O'Donnell joked that he was in love with Modesty and best friends with Willie, and his affection for both of them is palpable. Kingsley Amis, once described them as *'one of the great partnerships in fiction, bearing comparison with that of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson.'* Elementary, my dear Kingsley.

Ending his thirty-eight year run, in 2001 (strip #10183), he allows his heroes to bow out gracefully. The sun sets; Modesty smiles. *'No villains, no victims, no blood sweat and tears... We'll take a break, Willie love, just you and me.'* Mr Garvin, as ever, knows just what to say: *'Best bit of all, Princess.'* A few years earlier, in the short-story anthology *Cobra Trap* (1996), O'Donnell *had* revealed their final fate - a tale many tearful fans refuse to read. They should: heroes and friends to the end...and beyond.

Many thanks for the stories, Peter. I hope your true-love and your best friend await you. Fine company, indeed.

Best bit of all.

CHORUS OF DISSAPPROVAL

I don't *do* *Glee*.

By that, of course, I don't mean that readers may safely join Kermit and Co. in a chorus of *'There goes Mr. Humbug...There goes Mr. Grim'* (though it *is* true that even the vegetables don't like me – but, being a Weegee, their resentments are reciprocated) each time I carnaptiously course by. I am not an inveterate miserablist, though a Caledonian Calvinist heritage means that Grump and Glour *are* my default settings.

No, I just don't 'get' *Glee*. This surprised me. I expected to be engaged by this show, having heard great things about it from friends in the US, and being a long-time aficionado of musical theatre. I was once asked by a gay flatmate – more than one, now I come to think of it – if I was sure I wasn't (ahem!) *'batting for his team'*, as my CD collection was *"the gayest thing in Central Scotland"*. Broadway boyo Nathan Lane, when asked about his sexuality, once said *"Look, I'm 40, I'm single, and I work in musical theater - you do the math!"* Well, sorry Nate, luvvie – there's something fundamentally wrong with your equation: I'm 43, I'm single, and I think musical theatre is just *fabulous*...but while I can (and *will*, at the slightest prompting – hell, I can make bloody Barrowman seem like a shrinking violet when I get going) start belting out Cole Porter standards or hits from *La Cage Aux Folles*, I've avoided that *particular* theatrical cliché. I am what I am, sure enough, but what I am is single, straight...and...well...I'm not saying that theatre hasn't *influenced* my sexuality...but not, y'know, like *that*. Indeed it was the cause of the very first entry (as it were) on my heterosexual CV – as I lost my virginity to a wayward Arcadian Shepherdess during the overture of a school production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*. An oddly prophetic encounter, as many subsequent carnal interludes have – like that first one - involved me wearing tights, cloaks and/or

codpieces, and being befuddled by proceedings. There's no people like show people...ask any policeman.

This is, of course, another reason why I *should* like *Glee*. It has obvious geek-appeal, with its principal protagonists being drawn from the 'Others' of high school life – united against the harsh mundane cruelties of adolescence by their musical meanderings. I found similar choral camaraderie. An academically inclined, overweight, speccky comic geek growing up in a rough Glasgow suburb, I ticked so many 'Other' boxes I had to carry a spare pencil, but discovered a second life in the school Music Department. The 'Practice Rooms': my lair for nearly six years – a refuge from my football-obsessed arsewipe peers, where Geek was Chic...or as Chic as a bespectacled baby beachball was ever going to get. I was a bass-baritone by the time I reached high school. At only five feet (until a sudden sprouting at fourteen), I rather stood out in the Choir, surrounded by my strapping senior peers – useful when it came to the casting of the annual school shows...which introduced me to G&S and actual *performance* of musical theatre.



n *Iolanthe 1983. My first paying audience...*

I could never understand how people could reject the sonorous spontaneity of the medium – characters suddenly soliloquising in song and dance – as unrealistic, yet blithely accept all the trappings and tropes of mainstream action adventure (is a balletic gang-fight any less likely or dramatically viable than Scotty performing yet *another* Enterprise-saving Dilithium-related miracle?). I have been known to burst into song to express joy, sorrow or outrage, so that kind of behaviour doesn't fall utterly outside the realms of normalcy for me, anyway (a great way to get a rotten retailer to settle outstanding debts, incidentally, is to start singing selected highlights from 'H.M.S., Pinafore' very loudly in the middle of his shop).

For all I love *My Fair Lady*, *Oliver!*, *Show Boat*, *Man Of La Mancha* (great score, *really* shit libretto) *West Side Story* and other 20th-century classics, and have performed in all of 'em, I'm glad I started with Gilbert and Sullivan – my first role being as Pooh-Bah in *The Mikado*, in 1982 – as it made me more aware that music and lyrics in a good piece of performance are *equally* important. Arthur Seymour Sullivan was a wizard when it came to churning out memorable melodies, and even if you aren't a 'fan' you'll know a *huge number* of them – if only through adverts, cultural diffusion and the frolicsome finales favoured by Messrs Barker and Corbett, but William Schwenck Gilbert was...well...something else. For all his contemporary reputation as being 'twee', Gilbert was the scriptwriter most frequently censored by the Lord Chamberlain's blue-pencil in the 19th-century, but because they are considered pillars of respectability many of his dodgiest double entendres – Phyllis, the Arcadian Shepherdess, allows competing suitors to '*fish in her pond*' and '*shoot over her grassy plot*', and expresses great relief when she discovers her true love, Strephon, is '*half a fairy...on his mother's side*', but mortal from '*the waist down*' – slip through the net. Gilbert is bloody funny. Political. Emotionally intense. Silly and satisfying: the reason they are still frequently lampooned a century after their deaths is because what they did had lasting power. Enjoyment of Willie's words probably prompted my interest in an acting career...in writing, too.

Musicals allow free reign for fantasy. They allow an astonishing array of emotional expressions – from the intimate ('*Maria*', from *West Side Story*) to the poignantly satiric ('*When this Bloody War Is Over*' from *O, What A Lovely War*) and everything in between. *Glee*'s creator Ryan Murphy claims that he wanted to create a "*postmodern musical*". Um...surely the point is that the musical medium is *already* inherently postmodern – breaking down barriers between reality, fantasy, interior-life and any other luminal boundaries you care to consider? *Glee* is, for me, *amusing*...but too cynically contrived, too predictable – too wilfully *ironic* – to sustain my interest for long.

MONSTERS INC.

I have a soft-spot for monsters.

Not the misunderstood ogres of myth and media, you understand – the impossibly odd outsiders prompting a rousing Geek-chorus of "*One of us! One of us!*" in solidarity with these woe-benighted beasties. Wolfmen and their ilk appeal to the Other in each of us: driven by compulsions and desires which mark them out from the mundane normalcy of their peers. Poor them. Poor us.

No. The monsters whose company I relish most of all are a little closer to home. Freddy? Jason? Michael Myers? Pah...pantomime villains. Hannibal the Cannibal? Well, here we're getting closer to the mark, as his monstrosity is grounded in ghoulish reality – or perhaps 'plausibility' would be more accurate. Introduced in Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon* (1981) – adapted by Jonathan Demme as the movie *Manhunter* five years later, with Brian Cox as the incarcerated cannibal – Dr Lecter is charming, earnest,

erudite and amiable. A man it would be a pleasure to pass the time of day with, to open up to, to get to know. He wants to help you. He also, if the mood takes him, wants to kill, degrade and eat you. Cox is splendidly genteel: and it's his plausibility that makes him so dangerous, so magnificently manipulative. He's a psychiatrist, and knows how to engender trust. Tony Hopkins, on the other hand, was as much an unrealistic caricature of villainy as Freddy or Jason. Cox version, was scary because you could easily imagine him, like Dahmer, Shipton and so many others, successfully living amongst us, undetected. Hopkins' slathering ghoul...not so much.

Lecter scares us largely because his malevolence cannot be easily explained. Initially, anyway. Desire to keep the franchise running shifted narrative focus of his stories from his heroes, Will Graham and Clarice Starling, to the enigmatic supporting character. The history of Count Lecktor (!) was thus fleshed-out. Bad idea. If you can explain the Devil he loses much of his power and almost all of his unpredictability. He becomes mundane. He becomes *too* like us.

Dexter Morgan, Serial-star of Jeff Lindsay's blackly comic novels and Showtime's successful TV series, is a more satisfying beast. He knows he's a monster, but is as troubled as we are (moreso, perhaps) by the nature of his predatory, subconscious '*Dark Passenger*'. Deviant psychological glitch or self-aware demonic force (the latter is heavily hinted at in the third novel, *Dexter In The Dark* (2007))? Audiences, bizarrely, tolerate and condone his torture and evisceration of multiple victims because he has a 'code' and preys on 'bad people'. We assume that he shares fellow-feeling with us because he is adept in the same imitation of normalcy Hannibal supposedly practiced for so long. He *doesn't*: something he – if not we – is fully aware of, and which helps keep character and viewer on edge as his 'Passenger' takes him in unexpected directions, or circumstances challenge what he (and we) *think* we know about him.

Dexter's inner narrative offers an interesting – often comic – counterpoint to his perception of 'normal' society. This first-person confessional was seen as being quite a radical genre departure, but it was anything but. Francis Urquhart, the Machiavellian Chief Whip of Michael Dobbs' political satire *House of Cards* (1989) – so splendidly personified by the dignified but deadly Ian Richardson in Andrew Davies's TV adaptation, the following year – does the same. "*Dull dog, but sound as a bell... But the odd thing about Francis Urquhart, is that he'd never stab you in the back, however much he disliked you.*" says one political rival, unaware that the pleasant, *plausible* – that word again – friend-to-all will stop at nothing, from solicitation and blackmail to fraud, intimidation and cold-blooded murder to avenge the slight of being deprived Cabinet office by an ungrateful PM. Richardson's asides and orations – still quite startling, sometimes, given the otherwise naturalistic style of the TV drama – are positively Shakespearean, and hint back to that first great self-aware sociopath of popular fiction, Richard of Gloucester, *Richard III*. Like Tricky Dicky, Urquhart tells the audience *exactly* what he is going to do, when, how and why – he is no '*motiveless malignity*' (as Coleridge described Othello's bane, Iago, who constantly, and unconvincingly, seeks to

justify his malice) – yet we are still surprised when he does it...just as Richard, in the opening monologue of his own play (1591) declares

*I am determined to prove a villain...
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate, the one against the other.*



Sir Larry Olivier Hams it with a Hump

(c) 1955 London Films

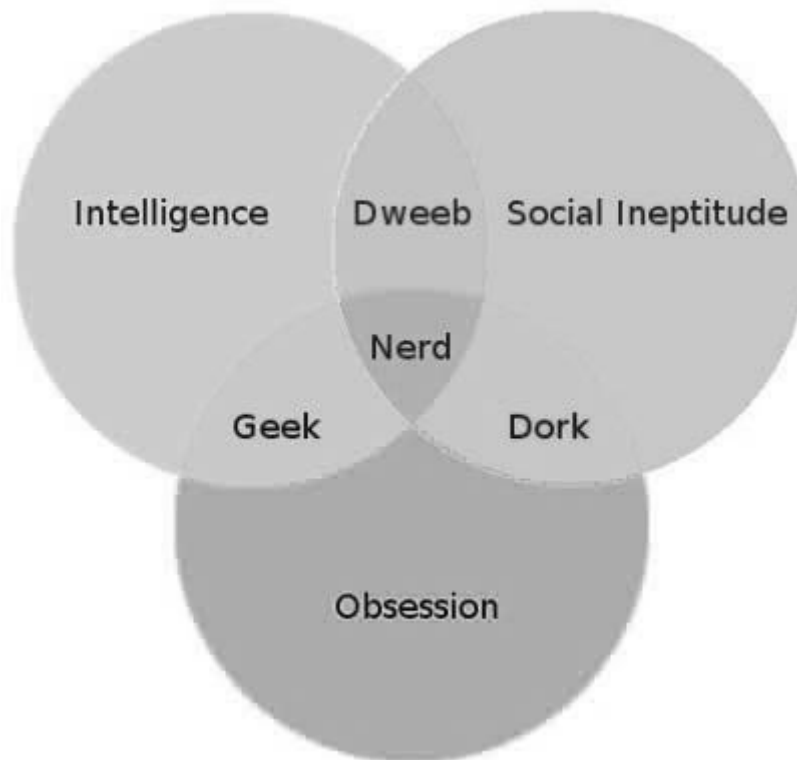
Richard identifies himself with *'the formal Vice, Iniquity'* (a popular character from the Morality Plays who would routinely cause chaos amongst the foolish and sinful, but survive to do it all again – for the amusement of audiences – another day). Urquhart is evil. We know that. But, like the wise-cracking Crookback, we tolerate and relish his villainy because he is smarter - and funnier – than those he preys upon. And, like Dicky, when he goes too far (Francis's murder of his young lover, Mattie Storin, echoing both Richard's orchestration of the killing of the innocent Princes in the Tower and his seemingly impassioned wooing of Lady Anne – whose husband *and* father he'd despatched in *Henry VI Part 3* (also 1591) - *'Was ever woman in such humour woo'd? Was ever woman in such humour won? I'll have her – but I will not keep her long.'*) he simply cuts us off. He's got what he wants and requires our complicity no longer. As with Hannibal, fleshing out Urquhart's character in subsequent outings diminished his power.

Part of the appeal of these monsters is that they are like us but - providing a darkly satisfying mirror to aspirational heroic ideals. They can be as vengeful and spiteful as we sometimes wish we could be – were we not fettered by conscience or fear of reprisal. Do I have a 'Dark Passenger' of my own, I wonder, chuckling quietly at their antics?

Well...you *might* think that, I couldn't *possibly* comment.

IDENTITY CRISIS

There is a fine line between Geek and Nerd.



Traditionally the Nerd is the 'swot', and the Geek the genre-obsessive. I've never seen it that way. It's all a matter of epistemology - of the nature of the knowledge they prize. Remember the shrieking outrage aimed at *The Big Bang Theory* in some quarters? Not all sci-fi or comic buffs are like that! They're not Geeks...they're Nerds. Well, yes, but there is a fair amount of flexibility within the Obsessive Pecking-Order. A Geek requires no particular specialized knowledge or expertise. Fascination and enervation are the keys. Both like to horde - be it genre-related goodies or geological samples. The more methodical Nerd is often more conspicuously anal-retentive in their selective specialisations.

A Geek may collect *Batman* comics, and know the contents of his Utility-Belt circa-1966. A Nerd knows not only which issue that knowledge was imparted to readers (*Detective Comics* #29), the cover date (July 1939), and it's originator (Gardner Fox, not Bill Finger or Bob Kane, as might be assumed). Actually, a Geek may well be in full possession of that information, but - and this is another key distinction between the Tribes - understands and delights in its inherent uselessness. To the Nerd nothing is irrelevant. Current Bat-guru Grant Morrison positively oozes Silver Age trivia, but there's a playfulness to his triviality: he doesn't mind if you don't 'get the gag', so long as you enjoy the story being told. Roy Thomas's legendary Golden Age love affairs latterly put

the trivia so far to the forefront that titles such as *America Versus the Justice Society* (1985) became more interesting for the text notes in the back of each issue were more interesting than the comics themselves. He latterly gave up scripting the funnies and has concentrated on his Golden/Silver Age fan-mag, *Alter Ego* (TwoMorrows Publishing). Extra Virgin Nerd.

The exclusivity of information is also an area of distinction. *Dr Who* Geeks relished the recent pop-culture phenomena their favourite fandom enjoyed. The Nerd Herd resented less informed and enlightened trespassers invading their trivia-turf.

I straddle this fine line like an incontinent Sumo wrestler: uncomfortably and with unfortunate emphasis on my anal aspect. At school I was always - unfairly, I feel - classed as a Nerd. I was academically orientated, true, but never within the traditional Nerd Kingdoms of Maths, Science or Computing. I was all History and Arts - all interpretive disciplines where fact and fancy carry equal weight. Geekville. As a comic-buff I segregate my Marvels, DCs, Dark Horses and Indies. I bag and board, and label each little four-colour package of joy with a tag noting title, issue(s), story-arc, author and artists. I tell myself that this is simply because - having a collection running into the tens of thousands - I like to keep track of what's what. Geeky, surely - though I know in my heart that a number/title tag would be sufficient to facilitate that task. This is, I think, a throwback to the index-cards I employed in my former academic studies, or when researching scripts or other historical projects, Geeks horde. Nerds catalogue.

As a youthful Tolkien fan I decked my walls with a self-made map of Middle Earth, charting the progress of characters, noting and cross referencing characters, chronologies, genealogies and mythologies. Pure Geek. J.R.R.'s endeavors to make his worlds as detailed as possible make them immediately attractive to the Geek-completist. Aged thirteen, I bought a book - now long lost - entitled *Teach Yourself Elvish*. I can't recall how many hours I wasted before realizing that I know absolutely no-one who would be able to converse with me, and that - while interesting from a purely academic perspective - the effort to attain this knowledge was without a shadow of a doubt the most arse-numbingly pointless activity I had (or have subsequently) engaged in. I find Tolkien's linguistic and legendary influences endlessly fascinating - but discovered, thankfully, that the pleasure they gave me was best separated from his storytelling. Just as well, as there are few people on this earth less humourlessly tedious than hard-core Middle Earth Nerds.

Though involved in historical dramatics, I've never ever been involved - or remotely interested - in Sealed Knot type 're-enactments', having been put-off by the po-faced musings of a number of those involved on the 'cultural significance' of their activities. Nerdy Ne'er-do-wells who get lost in the brush-strokes, and can't see the big picture. Those participants who understand that what they are doing is 'playing soldiers', I can relate to. They are Geeks, driven by enthusiasm, and out for fun.

The enthusiastic history Geek in me embraces the over-the-top excesses of *Rome*. Stylistically and historically it's as divorced from my understanding of that era as *Up Pompeii* - but the entertaining silliness of the whole shebang keeps it at a safe distance from my fact-happy Nerd-core. *The Tudors*, on the other hand, I find virtually unwatchable. It's no more accurate than *Rome*, but it's so wearisomely earnest that I find the short-cuts taken just plain offensive. Similarly, I wouldn't have Patricia Cornwell's shrill *Portrait of a Killer - Jack the Ripper: Case Closed* (2002) in the house, but love Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (1991-1996) and the 1979 Sherlock Holmes Ripper tale *Murder By Decree* - far more fanciful in many respects. Why? The nature of the 'knowledge-set' is the same, surely only it's application is different. Pat is blinded by a selectively specialized (and deluded) Nerd mindset.

So which am I? Ultimately I hope enthusiasm wins out, and that my delight in the odd, the obscure and the trivial - rather the point of these columns - wins out, and that I'm a Geek. I'm aware, though, that like Darkseid's son and heir Orion (first appearance Jack Kirby's *New Gods* #1, DC Comics, July 1971) I am a son of two worlds, and embrace (but seek to harness) my Inner Nerd.

Excuse me, now, I have last month's comics to catalogue...

FADE TO BLACK...

All good things must come to an end.

There's always a temptation to look for meaning in endings, from the cathartic emotional rush of the Great Dane's recognition that his unprincipled prevarications have royally bugged up his plot for revenge, to the happy homilies of family friendly TV fare - serving up the moral du jour as bite-size soundbites: "*You see, Timmy...!*" moments. In both there's a sense of satisfying finality. Easy closure. Everything which has gone before leads simply and inexorably to the daily reading from the *Book of Ben Cartwright*...or the *Gospel According to Cosby*...or whichever law-giving patriarch happens to be presiding.

With Tragedy there is a certainty to proceedings. From word-one you know that the protagonist is completely gubbed; that however hard he struggles, whatever heroic aspirations are realized, he will fail, and that it will be his own bloody fault. That's the thing with 'fatal flaws'. How they suffer - and, oh *how* they suffer - is the point. They generally enjoy a brief moment of realization, of course, however skewed that understanding may be. That jealous old Othello "*loved not wisely, but too well*" is small consolation to the newly strangled Desdemona...still, as long as he *knows* he's screwed up, that's okay. Like the Montagues and Capulets, we realize that the journey of the heroes reflects and informs our understanding of ourselves. Tragedies are about consequence, and, like funerals, they exist largely for the benefit of those left behind.

With Comedies - unless you are Shylock (poor sod) - the hero will prevail, achieving fortune, self-understanding and the love of a good woman - or, if he's very lucky, a bad one. Comedies don't have to be funny, of course, just end well. Buffy gets to share her burden and live an ordinary life. The Galacticans get new and ever-recursive opportunities to screw things up with the Cylons. Alex Drake gets closure, and Gene Hunt rediscovers his purpose. The heroes of *Lost* get...um lost (along with their audiences) in unsatisfyingly half-hearted attempts to resolve mysteries which it's authors hadn't properly plotted out (Abrams did exactly the bloody same with his *Alias* mythology). Were these tales metaphors for teenage alienation, societal discord or existential angst? Who knows? We want these stories to mean something often simply because it makes the chaff as easy to digest as the wheat.

Then there's the expectant almost-a-cliffhanger ending. Chief Inspector Christopher Foyle got to quietly board a ship to America at the end of *Foyle's War*, causing a pleasing chuckle from fans fully aware that his US 'lecture tour' was likely to be a pretext allowing him to hunt down a murderous industrialist who escaped his particular form of quiet justice in an early episode. Louis and Rick solidify their "*beautiful friendship*" on an inexplicably rain-strewn Moroccan runway. Molly Bloom gives a life-affirming "Yes." Willie and Modesty, four decades of daring deeds done, die as heroes and meet again in an afterlife of their own devising: friends forever. A door closes on Francine and Katchoo, having found happiness, themselves and (finally) each other. A door closes. We know in our hearts that the story isn't done, but that we are not permitted to witness what follows. Quite right, too. We've seen them at their best, through triumph and tragedy. The best may well be yet to come, but it's theirs, not ours. Let them enjoy their immortality in peace. Better that than make them endlessly repetitive caricatures of themselves, diminished by time and wretched familiarity. The door closed we need not concern ourselves with what is yet to come, and the Return of the Hero is rarely satisfying.

Still, we ask ourselves, what does it all mean? After all, sometimes The End is just...an end.

There is, of course, another kind of ending, the sort where the protagonist simply decides, against expectation, to opt out. Jack Knight, at the end of James Robinson's superb *Starman* comic series, in 2001, does just that. He chooses a quiet life, and hasn't returned to the DC Universe. To the credit of editors, Robinson hasn't been requested to disturb his creation's retirement. The most graceful exit in comics.

When I was asked to contribute this weekly column, a little over a year ago, I told myself that I would, irrespective of circumstance, strive to stick to a schedule. Largely I've managed that, despite the interruptions of mundanity, mugging and mishap. I also told myself that when the day came when the weekly task of sitting down for a couple of hours to rant or ruminate on a favourite fillip or fandom became a chore, I'd stop. Since I stressed myself into another Mini-Stroke in the late Spring, I'm afraid that has been the case. Fortunately I had, at the time, a number of near-completed columns, so the burden

of meeting a weekly schedule wasn't too great. Now, though I find that I'm more irritable and less focused on the task in hand, and it would be an insult to regular readers - and to the editors and proof-readers - to plough on in snappish manner, dissatisfied by my own output and needlessly narked by editorial minutiae (NOT the cause of my departure, incidentally - as some of you know I've been thinking about this for quite some time).

Sixty-odd columns isn't a bad run. I hope you've enjoyed them, and wish my regular readers well: I just don't have the physical or emotional energy required, right now, to keep this up. No Tragedy. No pregnant pause. No tears or tantrums. No morals. This is as graceful an opportunity for a dignified exit as I'm going to get....we can't all be Starman.

So, what more is there to say? *"Hasta la vista, baby!"*? *"So long and thanks for all the fish!"*?. *"Live long and prosper!"*?. *"Pub!"*? *"It's the end, but the moment has been prepared for...!"*?

"And the rest", as the ham I started with once said, *"is silence."*



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